REBORN AS A

SPACE MERCENARY

I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL 3

WRITTEN BY
Ryuto

ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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"Once I've finished protecting you, the necklace is yours again, my lady."
"Ha ha! This really is like a holo-novel!"
Chris
Hiro
REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!

This resort planet abounds with beaches! Can't have a beach without swimsuits! 'Nuff said.
Mimi
Elma
"Erm, what do you think?"
"It's fantastic."
I shot the nervous Mimi a thumbs-up.

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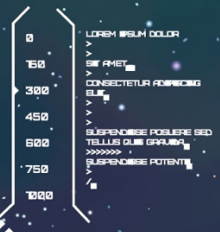

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.3
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Prologue

SOMETHING TICKLED my nose, and warmth began to envelope me as I awoke. My still-sleepy brain, reluctant to leave its peaceful state, didn't bother to send movement signals to the rest of my body. Someone was clinging to me, and something soft was pressed against my chest. *This must be heaven.*

But as soon as my brain registered the situation, it woke up all at once. When I opened my eyes, I found light-brown hair covering my face; it was the nose-tickling culprit. A girl was using my arm as a pillow, her face buried in my chest. She was naked. *That's just our relationship, after all.*

What do I do, then? I'd feel bad waking her up, but I need to take a shower and use the bathroom. I don't know what time it is, but I don't feel sleep-deprived, so it can't be too early. Okay, I'll just wake her up as gently as possible.

Relenting, I stroked her hair, gently waking her. Before long, she moaned and opened her eyes, smiling sleepily up at me.

"Morning, Mimi," I said.

"Good morning, Master Hiro."

***

The next destination for our motley crew was the Cierra System.

It was about four hyperlanes away from the Arein System. These lanes spread throughout the universe like intergalactic highways, transporting travelers anywhere from tens to hundreds of times the speed of light.

After all the excitement in the Arein System, we chose the Cierra System partially because it was a resort system, where citizens without landowner rights, mercenaries like me who were never citizens, and even foreigners could set down their ships and relax. We could check out the

ocean, enjoy nature on a mountainside, go hunting, or have a barbecue. According to the system's brochure, we could expect to enjoy such natural phenomena as gorgeous sunrises, dazzling sunsets, blue skies, fluffy clouds, breathtaking starry night skies, and even the occasional shooting star.

"It sounds magnificent, doesn't it?" Mimi was beaming as she read the brochure on her tablet.

"Yeah," Elma said with a smile of her own. "When you're born and raised in a colony, you don't get to see stuff like that."

Once Mimi and I had finally gotten out of bed this morning, we'd taken a bath together and met up with Elma. Even after finishing our breakfast, all three of us hung around in the cafeteria chatting about our hopes for our next destination.

"Hmm…" I said. What Mimi called "magnificent" was all just normal stuff to me. Maybe people who lived in colonies never got to see sunrises, beaches, or mountains. Those things didn't seem unusual or special to me, but I was still excited to get to experience a nice blue sky and girls in swimsuits. Very much so, might I add. After all the work we'd been doing lately, we all deserved a little vacation.

Anyway, I digress. Hopefully, the Cierra System would deliver. Even there, we'd find a few colonies, as people still had to work and live in the system. Sometimes people had to wait on a colony before going to one of the resorts. The colonies also served as export hubs for the high-quality raw materials from the resort planets and as markets for those goods.

Unfortunately, all that beauty came at a high cost. So high, in fact, that some people used virtual reality to experience the resorts instead of paying the outrageous docking costs. *Doesn't that kind of defeat the point?*

That about sums it up. Now, you might be wondering how mercenaries fit into all this. Well, it wouldn't be all play and no work.

The Cierra System got a lot of visitors. That meant plenty of passenger cruises—and all of them needed guards. Plus, all that luxury meant lots of shipments from other systems and lots of merchants. All of this made it a tempting target for space pirates. Even the guests themselves, many of whom were quite wealthy, lured in pirates, who wanted to kidnap them for ransom, personal "enjoyment," or to sell as slaves.

It was an ugly situation, just like any other time pirates got involved. Even if they didn't get people, they could pilfer the merchant and supply ships for food, alcohol, everyday items, and luxuries. That meant the Cierra System needed to hire mercenaries and others to defend the ships. The space pirates retaliated by bolstering their forces, roaming in bands of twenty to thirty ships. In response, mercenaries also moved in groups here, forming parties through Cierra Prime's guild. Mercs were on bodyguard duty just as often as pirate-hunting duty, it seemed.

"Hiro?" Elma said, bringing me back to Earth—er, the ship.

"Hm? What's up?"

"You just shut down out of nowhere. What's the deal?"

"I was just thinking about how we can make money in the Cierra System."

"I'm surprised you're such a hard worker. Why are you thinking about business instead of vacationing right now?"

"You're *surprised*?" Jeez. After all the hard work I'd done for this crew, she still saw me as a lazy jerk. "I'm not sure what to say about that… I guess it's in my nature to work hard." More likely, it was a cultural habit. I was still Japanese at heart, after all. Leave us alone, and we'd work ourselves into the ground. "Anyway, should we start with the Cierra Prime colony?"

"I think so," Mimi said. "It's important to go through the necessary procedures before we can enjoy our resort vacation."

"Okay. When we leave hyperspace, let's go there right away. How much longer are we here for?"

"About an hour and a half," Elma told me.

"Then I'll have time to clean the sweat off after my workout."

"What a hard worker you are," the space elf said wryly.

"Sound body, sound mind," I quipped back.

"Mm-hmm. Whatever you say."

"Jeez, how rude can you get? You're lucky to have a nice guy like me."

Elma leveled a flat stare at me. “No idea how you can say that about yourself.”

I can’t help it! This universe’s video games just don’t jive with me. There wasn’t much to do during a long inter-system trip. My only ways of killing time were reading e-books, working out, or retreating to the bedroom with Mimi or Elma. *I really need a hobby.*

“I’ll come with you to train,” Mimi said.

“Really?” I said. “Awesome. Let’s go.”

“Fiiine,” Elma cut in. “I’ll go too.”

“You sure?” I asked.

They followed me to the training room. It was a little cramped with all of us trying to do our thing, but whatever. I focused on working up a sweat with strength training, Mimi prioritized endurance, and Elma mixed flexibility and that terrifying explosive power of hers.

“Ow, ow, ouch!” I said.

“Ugh, you’re too stiff,” Elma griped. “You really need to think about flexibility and not just muscle mass.”

“Argh, ouch! That’s not supposed to bend that far!”

“Yes, it is. C’mon. One, two, three, go!”

“Aaagh?!”

Elma dragged me into her flexibility training, mercilessly contorting my stiff body. I felt like I was about to burst at the seams. *I’m dying…*

“Does it hurt that much?” Mimi asked.

“Not for you. You’re much more flexible, Mimi,” Elma said.

“Hee hee, thank you! I’m quite confident in that area.”

“Urgh…” *It’s great that you’re having a nice chat and all, but you’re literally folding me in on myself! You’re going to make me cry.* By the time we finished our training, Elma and Mimi skipped out, refreshed and feeling good, while I hobbled along behind them with sore muscles I didn’t even know I had.

Do I need to go to the medical pod? Elma's gonna break me one of these days.

Chapter 1:
Sleeping Beauty

"WE'LL BE ENTERING normal space soon," Mimi said. "Counting down: five, four, three, two, one. Here we are!" There was a boom—or maybe more of a ba-boom!—as we shifted from the gaudy, flashing colors of hyperspace to the sedate darkness of normal space. Stars filled our view, pinpricks of silver on the canopy of endless black.

"Comparing system data. Confirming coordinates," Elma said, tapping away. "Okay, I've found our location."

"I'll set up the navigation data for Cierra Prime." Mimi used the data to point us toward our destination.

I smiled, watching them work so seamlessly. Mimi especially had come a long way since we'd first met in the Tarmein System. Now, she and Elma worked together effortlessly, my crucial crewmates.

"Nice," I said. "Okay, let's get going. Prepare faster-than-light drive."

"Understood," Elma replied. "Charging faster-than-light drive. Five, four, three, two, one… Charging complete. Activating FTL

drive." With another thundering boom, we dashed into FTL. The still, tranquil stars blurred into streaks of light.

"We should reach the colony in about ten minutes, as long as nothing bad happens," I informed them.

"Yes," Mimi said. "Provided there's no trouble like before…"

The moment those words left her lips, the alarms blared.

"Seriously, Mimi?" I said.

"Huh?! Why is it my fault?!" Tears built up in her eyes.

"No, it's not your fault. It's just that you kinda jinxed us."

"You two are awfully carefree, given there's an interdictor pointed our way," Elma said.

Many things I encountered in this galaxy were inexplicable to me—and that included the interdictors. They could yank speeding ships right out of FTL drive with some sort of mass- or gravity-based device. Not just anyone could get their hands on a device like that. Most of the people who had an interdictor were galactic police on patrol. A ship like ours looked pretty suspicious zipping around completely alone. It wasn't surprising that the galactic patrol thought we were either mercenaries or dangerous pirates.

Speaking of pirates… Unfortunately, they were the next most likely folks to have an interdictor. They used the devices to stop merchants and passenger ships in FTL, capture them by force, and steal crew, passengers, and cargo alike.

Sometimes, mercenaries like me used interdictors. The Krishna had one, though I had yet to actually use it. It could come in handy when chasing down a slippery bounty.

"What do you think we're up against?" I asked.

"Almost definitely pirates," Elma said.

"Figures…" They had their interdictor trained us but hadn't tried to communicate at all. Way more likely to be pirates than cops, in that case.

"Why do you think they've targeted us?" Mimi asked.

"Just because we're alone, I bet," Elma said. "They must have seen us on their radar as soon as we left hyperspace." We slipped out of the interdictor's hold, whether that force was gravity or something else entirely. Whoever was using it wasn't very skilled.

"We could kill 'em," I suggested.

"Are you sure?" Elma asked. "They say pirate groups are a lot bigger here."

"It's cool. If this is the best that their interdictor's got, then I'm not worried."

"Huh. Yeah, you're right. Let's do it."

"Awesome. Mimi, prepare for battle. There'll be a lot of them, so keep your eyes on the radar. Also, brace for g-forces. I might have to do some maneuvers our anti-gravity device won't be able to handle."

“Yes, sir!” Mimi said.

“Elma, deploy chaff as soon as we return to normal space. Use the flares too, if you have to.”

“Gotcha,” Elma said. “I’m ready anytime.”

“Here we go.” I drastically decreased generator output and left FTL travel, heeding the interdictor’s pull. If we were going to fight, then exiting FTL on our own was better than being yanked out of it by force.

Boom! As we left FTL, the stars settled from streaks to soft, still pinpoints.

“Two unidentified craft have locked on,” Mimi reported. “I see thirteen enemy ships.”

“Deploying chaff,” Elma said.

“Weapons system online. Here goes.” I brought the generator back up to max and charged into the battle. *Aww, yeah. It’s showtime!*

***

“Situation resolved,” I said. “Mm, kinda disappointing.” Calling what had just happened a “battle” would have been too generous. The moment I let loose with my flak cannons and heavy lasers, the pirates scattered into disarray. I wiped them out as they scrambled to flee.

“This ship’s just too unfair,” Elma commented. “It looks like a small ship, but its output and firepower are on par with much bigger ones.”

“It might be a little unfair, but its specialized mobility comes with some huge drawbacks.”

“Mm, true. Not that it’s as bad as the Swan.”

“You must be good if you were able to use that thing well. I could never do it.”

I steered the Krishna toward the wreckage of the pirate ships as we talked so we could begin salvaging parts and goods.

“I know I should be used to it by now, but…” Mimi glanced between us as we chatted.

Hmm. She must be bothered by hearing the pirates’ final screams. To be fair, they were pleading for their lives.

“Do you think we’re being too calm about killing people?” I asked.

“Erm…” Mimi hesitated. The answer was obviously “yes,” but she didn’t want to say it.

“Mimi, if you worry about it every time, you’ll be depressed forever,” I said. “They’re like space monsters, but a little harder to deal with, since they’ve got human intelligence. Remember, they murder people without mercy.”

“Hiro’s right,” Elma said. “You don’t have to listen to their last screams and their begging. Do you think they listen to innocent people’s begging when they attack their ships? Not at all. They’re trash, and they got what was coming to them.”

“Okay.” Still, Mimi’s shoulders slumped and her head hung heavy. I couldn’t see her face, but she must’ve looked miserable.

“It might be rough, but maybe that’s for the best, Mimi. Elma and I are a little less sympathetic, so we need a good conscience like you on the ship to ground us.”

“Hey, I have a conscience,” Elma said. “Mimi, you can’t be sympathetic to space pirates. If we let them escape, they could hurt dozens or even hundreds of people.”

“Okay.” From the hunch of her shoulders, it didn’t look like our words were making Mimi feel any better. I wasn’t really sure what to say at times like these. *Sorry, Mimi.*

“I’m not seeing any notable cargo,” Elma said.

“Yeah. Non-perishable food, booze, and a bit of Rare Metal,” I said. “None of their equipment is worth stripping off either… Oh?”

I caught a glint in the darkness of space and gasped when I recognized it.

“What’s wrong?” Elma asked.

“I think we found something crazy…”

“Huh? Ugh, is it another Singing Crystal?”

“Nope. Check it out.” I sent the loot data over to Mimi and Elma.

“Is that…a cold-sleep pod?” Elma asked. “Eugh, and it’s in use!”

“In use? Do you mean there are survivors inside?” I asked.

In *Stella Online*, players tended to just sell off cold-sleep pods, but in this universe, they were actually used as emergency escape pods. They could keep someone in suspended animation at a low temperature, slowing down their metabolism so they could survive for a long time with minimal resources. The pods were supposed to send out distress signals so their users could get rescued. So what the heck was one doing in a pirate ship?

“Well, we can’t just leave them there,” Elma said. “Let’s check that the pod’s not bugged. We have to recover it.”

“You’re right,” I said.

We were duty-bound to try to save the person in this pod—it was actually a crime not to! I didn’t want a bounty on my head, even though some mercs and merchants got away with abandoning pods. Still, it would catch up to us sooner or later. Better to just do our duty.

“Guess we should grab it,” I said. “Let’s get this to the colony as soon as possible.”

“For a vacation, we’re really getting off to a rough start,” Elma said with a sigh. “But I guess the pirates were the first sign, huh?”

“Excuse me, but…why is finding this pod a problem?” Mimi asked.

Elma and I shared a look, pilot to copilot, each trying to force the other to explain. After our harsh words about pirates, neither of us wanted to say that saving lives could be a massive annoyance.

Elma broke first and sighed. “Depending on what your cold-sleep pod is like, you have to deal with a few days of memory loss,” she said. “For up to a week, whoever finds you has to protect you. At the least, whoever saved you can legally get you to pay the necessary expenses after it’s all said and done.”

“Basically, we can’t go on vacation for a week,” I said. “We can’t fight pirates either. But hey, that’s the price to save a life.”

“I see. Saving lives is still worth it, in my opinion. After all, you saved Elma and me.”

“Yeah, she’s right,” Elma said. “That’s what I get for saying we’re off to a bad start. Let’s just hope the person inside doesn’t have any baggage we have to deal with.”

“The person inside, huh? I guess we won’t know until we open the pod,” I said. Hopefully, we’d find a reasonable person inside, maybe even someone who still had all their memories. Elma had warned me before that we could get some pretty rough customers from a pod like this, though. “Either way, let’s set a course for Cierra Prime right away. We’re done salvaging.”

“Sure. Mimi, can you set up navigation again?” Elma asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll ready the navigation data.”

The colony pinged on the cockpit’s main display.

“Off we go, then. Begin charging faster-than-light drive,” I ordered.

“Okay. Charging now,” Elma said.

Thus, we stowed the cold-sleep pod in our cargo hold and resumed our journey to Cierra Prime, unsure just what kind of trouble would pop out of that pod.

***

I couldn’t help remembering good old Tarmein Prime when we reached Cierra Prime. Similarly, Cierra Prime formed a bicycle-tire shape, with several elevators all leading to the outer ring and a gravity port district in the center. Cierra was about twice the size of Tarmein, however. I had to wonder just how many tens of thousands of people they could fit in a massive colony like this.

“It looks like Tarmein Prime, doesn’t it?” Mimi said, echoing my thoughts. Wistfulness quieted her voice as she reminisced about the colony

where we'd first met, the colony that had once been her home.

"It is the same type of colony, yeah," Elma said. "But the inside is totally different."

"Mimi, send a docking request."

"Oh. Y-yes, sir!" Mimi contacted Cierra Prime's Port Authority, and before long, we got permission to dock in the thirty-second hangar.

"Okay, here goes," I said. "Time to drive safely."

"Yes. *Safely*," Elma echoed with a vacant stare.

She must have been recalling the crazy debt she'd racked up when her ship rampaged, damaging other ships on its wild ride. It wasn't due to her negligence, though… Okay, yeah, it kind of was. How did those rampaging swan ships ever get sold in this universe, anyway? If they were cars, they'd be recalled instantly. *Maybe I should look that up.*

We docked at the high-traffic port without incident, unlike many of the newbies I used to encounter in *Stella Online*. All too often, they scraped the bottom of their ships and smacked into things, messing up their propulsion and other systems. All it really took was a little practice, though. These days, I could slide in like a pro. By that, I meant that I relied completely on the auto-docking function. No shame.

"Auto-docking is so lame," Elma griped.

"What's your deal? Did auto-docking kill your parents?"

"N-now, now. It is convenient," Mimi said, trying to intercede.

Elma always seemed to have something snarky to say about the auto-docking. Maybe she had a bad experience or something, but I couldn't understand why she hated me using it so much.

"Who should we call about the cold-sleep pod?" I asked.

"The Port Authority is fine," Elma said. "They're the ones who deal with galactic law, anyway."

"Gotcha. Mimi, you take care of registering for our extended stay. I'll call the Port Authority about this cold-sleep pod. Elma, I'll leave supporting us both up to you."

"Yes, sir!"

“Yeah, yeah.”

Just one “yeah” would’ve been plenty. I kept my lips zipped, opening a communication line to the Port Authority instead.

A woman quickly responded. “You’ve reached the Port Authority.”

“This is Captain Hiro with the mercenary guild. My ship’s name is Krishna, and I’m staying in the thirty-second hangar.”

“Verifying now… Okay, confirmed. Do you have any issues to bring to our attention, Captain Hiro?”

“‘Issue’ is definitely a word for it,” I said. “When we arrived in this system, space pirates attacked us. We found a cold-sleep pod among their cargo.”

“I see; so you’ve had to save a victim,” the woman said. “You require a witness for when you open the pod, then. Are you aware of your responsibility to protect the victim?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m stuck with them for a week, right? What do I do with them after the week is up if they have nowhere to go?”

“We’ll verify their identity within the week,” the woman said. “You have no need to worry. We can identify any citizen of the Empire with almost 100 percent certainty.”

“What if they’re not from the Empire?” I asked.

“In that case, the Empire will take them into custody. You won’t be forced to look after them any longer,” the Port Authority woman assured me in a calm voice.

I didn’t like the thought of what “take them into custody” might mean. I chose to believe this person would be a citizen of the Empire.

“What do we do, exactly? Should we open the pod in our cargo bay?”

“No,” the woman said. “We have a specialized space for it, so we’ll do it there. Please pass along the necessary information. The shipping code is…”

I typed the code into the cockpit’s console. From here, the pod would travel through the colony’s shipping system to arrive at the Port Authority.

It felt like a strange—if not downright creepy—way to treat a human being, like they were mail.

"We've confirmed the shipment," the woman said. "Please arrive here at your earliest convenience so we can open the pod."

They really don't care about our circumstances at all. I guess I couldn't blame them. The longer that person stayed in the pod, the worse their memory loss might get.

"Hear that, girls?" I announced. "I'm going to the Port Authority's office. Somebody come with me."

"We don't know what will happen, so I believe Elma should be the one to do it," Mimi said. "She has more experience in battle."

"Yeah, maybe so. Sure, I'll come with," Elma said. I didn't miss the beat of hesitation before she agreed. Something was definitely on her mind.

"Then let's go. Mimi, sell off the loot and cargo as needed. I'll leave it up to you."

"Understood, Captain!" Mimi said.

We'd picked up this cargo–some high-tech equipment—all the way back in the Arein System. I didn't think much of it, but Mimi and Elma were convinced it would sell for a good price here. We had plenty of space for it too. The two of them were practically running a small business out of the cargo hold at this point. I got 50 percent of the profits, and they split the other half. When I complained my share was too large, they insisted, and I knew better than to fight it. We left Mimi to her cargo empire while Elma and I disembarked and headed to the Port Authority office.

"Hey," I said as we walked, "it seemed like something was on your mind earlier. Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Elma replied. "I was just thinking about letting Mimi experience some of this, since this probably won't be the last time we have to deal with a cold-sleep pod. But then I decided we should let you experience it first, and then *you* can train Mimi next time it happens."

"Well, Great and Wise Elma, I humbly await your guidance."

"It's been a long time since you last called me that, huh?"

I smiled, remembering when we were met and how she used to bristle at the nickname. She really lived up to it, though. Any time I needed to know about a place, people, or system, Elma had the answer.

"All the buildings here look the same," I mused.

"It's a problem of efficiency," Elma said. "We have limited materials and space inside colonies. Standardizing all the buildings keeps things streamlined. It would be a major luxury to bring in different materials for a unique structure."

"Interesting." Part of me wondered if this was just copying and pasting by the developers of *Stella Online*. The in-game universe had a lot of uniform buildings for that reason. But Elma's explanation also made sense.

Among the blur of uniform structures, we found the Port Authority building. Inside, employees waited behind a large counter. Among the visitors in the waiting room, I spotted mercenaries like us, people in suits, and everything in between. At least there was no one in power armor.

"I'm Captain Hiro," I said when I approached the counter. "I called about the cold-sleep pod."

"The cold-sleep pod… All right, I've verified your appointment. The pod has already arrived. Take that hallway down to the first pod-opening room."

We headed down the hall as instructed.

"The first pod-opening room…" Elma looked around. "There it is." She pushed open the door to a room containing a few more Port Authority personnel and the cold-sleep pod. One tapped at a console. Wires and cords sprang from the pod, connecting it to the machinery in the room.

We were greeted by a man in his late thirties or early forties. "Hello there. Captain Hiro, I presume?" He tried to sound cheerful, but the tension around his eyes and mouth were plain to see.

"Yeah," I said. "Who are you?"

"A mere Port Authority employee. My name is Bruno." He extended his hand. When I accepted, he gripped me in a bone-crushing handshake. "And who is this lovely lady?"

“Elma. She’s a member of my crew.”

“Wow. I’m jealous,” Bruno said. His smile was far too knowing for my liking. How would he feel if he knew about our short little hottie back in the ship? “So let’s get right to it. First, the contents of the pod seem safe. There was a girl inside. She’s being thawed and resuscitated right now.”

“A girl, huh? Well, I have two other ladies on my crew who should be able to help her.”

“Yeah,” Elma said, sounding eager. “We’ll be glad to have another gal around.”

Frankly, having another lady around seemed like less hassle than some stuffy old man. I wouldn’t know how to deal with him, honestly; I’d probably put up Elma and Mimi in some other lodging while he and I stayed in the Krishna.

“Do we have any other info?” I asked.

“Yes,” Bruno said. “This escape pod is from a high-class passenger ship that was attacked by pirates three months ago. The passengers were all rich merchants and nobles. Chances are, she’s the child of one. And look at this.” Bruno pointed at the pod, but all I saw were traces of severed components.

“What’s that about?”

“That is where the distress-signal emitter unit is supposed to be,” Bruno said. “It was probably sliced off with a noble’s sword.”

Many of the Grakkan Empire’s nobility carried swords around. I’d never witnessed their sharpness myself, but I had no doubt they could slice right through metal.

“Smells like trouble,” I said.

“Sucks to be you, my man, but if you save this poor little lady, you can expect a hefty reward.”

I nodded. Hopefully, she’d be reasonable. That bit about being noble or at least high-born had me worried, though.

“I’ll leave the lady to you and Mimi,” I told Elma.

“Hey!” she exclaimed, apparently as excited as I was about the prospect of dealing with the upper crust.

“Good luck.”

“Seriously?”

“Good luck!”

Elma glared at me, pursing her lips.

I mean, what did she expect? No matter how sweet and obedient the little lady might be, a guy like me couldn’t just get close to someone like that.

“Vitals are stable,” one employee announced. “We can open it now.”

“Awesome,” Bruno said. “Time to meet the little lass! Are you ready, Captain?”

“Ready any time,” I said. “Let’s get this over with instead of making a big deal out of it.”

“Fair, fair. Open it up!”

“Yes, sir. Opening now.”

Psheeew! White smoke hissed out as the lid rose and slid to the side. I peeked inside, where I spotted a cute little girl with a short black bob. I backed off so she wouldn’t have to wake up to the sight of my ugly mug.

“Urk?!” As I tried to retreat, she suddenly reached up, snagging me by the jacket.

“Papa, don’t go…” she said.

“Huh?”

“Please, stay…”

I was at a total loss as she continued to hold my jacket, tears in her eyes. I glanced at Elma, Bruno, and the other Port Authority staff for help, but they all shrugged and grinned at me. It seemed I was on my own.

“Okay, fine.” I set my hand over hers and she seemed to calm, drifting back to sleep. “What am I supposed to do about this?”

“I guess you’ve gotta stay like that until she wakes up,” Elma said. “So, Bruno, let’s get to the paperwork, shall we?”

“All right, but it looks like she’s gonna do just fine.” He laughed, and I held back the desire to deck him right there and then.

I looked up to the ceiling, my hand eternally trapped in the grip of this sleeping princess. How did it come to this?

***

The girl didn’t wake again for quite a while. Cold sleep was more *suspension* than rest; it wasn’t as easy as waking up after a nap. She’d likely come back totally exhausted. Nevertheless, she was *out*.

“Mmn…” She groaned, scrunching up her face. Was she having a nightmare? She still clung to my hand and I squeezed hers, trying to soothe her.

“Babysitting isn’t really my thing, but…” I sighed. *What am I supposed to do when she wakes up? I hope she doesn’t call the police the moment she notices a strange man holding her hand. I’d better not be the one who has to explain everything to her.*

Based on her age, she couldn’t have been traveling alone. Her family should’ve been on the ship with her. Yet somehow those pirates only picked her up. What had happened to her family? When she said, “Papa, don’t go,” what did that mean?

The Port Authority would investigate her background, the ship she was on, and the status of the passengers, but I wasn’t optimistic for a happy ending to this story. I braced myself for tragedy. I sighed again. At least someone had brought me a stool to sit on while I waited.

My handheld pinged with a message from Elma. *I’m off to the mercenary guild.*

Sounds good, I said. *The girl still hasn’t woken up yet.*

How old is she? Mimi asked. Once we’d filled her in on the situation in our group chat, she’d seemed pretty worried.

I dunno. Younger than you, Mimi. I'd say somewhere between ten and twelve years old.

She was the same height as you, though! Elma added.

Don't talk to me about my height, please…

Elma responded with a sticker of a silly-looking, smirking, one-eyed alien. Mimi replied with what looked like an angry cat. I just shook my head at their cute play-fighting.

I maneuvered the terminal so I could snap a quick picture of the girl in the pod, then interrupted their sticker stream with the image.

Here's a pic of the sleeping beauty for the crowd.

Aww, cute! Mimi sent a sticker with some kind of space cat or squirrel with hearts in its eyes.

Don't take pictures of girls in their sleep! Elma said. *But yes, she is cute.*

I'm gonna take a cute pic of you sleeping next, Elma, I said.

Don't you dare. The next one-eyed alien sticker was distinctly angry.

I'd volunteer for a cute picture, Mimi said, punctuating it with a space-cat-squirrel fidgeting with bashfulness. All their adorable stickers made me tempted to get some for myself, but I didn't know the characters from this universe.

"Mm?"

I was tapping at my terminal with my free hand when the girl woke again. She stared up vacantly at me, and I gave her hand a squeeze.

"Papa?" she said.

"Sorry. I'm not your Papa."

More awake now, the girl surveyed the room. "Papa… Where's Papa?"

"I don't know. I found you alone. Sorry."

"I see." She closed her eyes. Then her grip tightened. "My hand…" She opened her eyes and glanced at our overlapping hands. "Thank you for holding my hand."

“Oh…” I released her hand at last, and she struggled to sit up.

The girl locked eyes with me. “Thank you. My name is Christina Dalenwald. I am the daughter of Friedrich Dalenwald, heir to Count Dalenwald.”

What is all of this all of a sudden?! Uh, okay, so her name is Christina. Her grandpa is the count, and her father, Friedrich, is the next count.

“I’m Captain Hiro, a silver-rank mercenary with the guild,” I told her. “I own a small craft called the Krishna. Just call me Hiro, though.”

“Very well, Sir Hiro. You may call me Chris.” She smiled awkwardly. I thought she was pretty when she was sleeping, but awake, she was cuter. Her features were naturally perfect, and her eyes shone like onyx. If we were in Japan, they’d say, “A beauty like her only comes once in a hundred years.” Though she was…a little slim.

“I should probably explain what’s going on,” I said. “Do you mind if I’m a little informal? I can answer any questions you have at the end.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I may be from a count’s family, but I’m just a little girl.”

Thankfully, it seemed she had none of the haughty noble attitude I’d expected. Still, she was awfully calm for someone who just woke up in a strange room. Maybe it was her upbringing, but she was very mature for her age. And hey, that worked just fine for me.

“All right. First off, you should know that I found you in a cold-sleep pod in a pirate ship. We’d just defeated the pirates. When we picked up your pod, we came straight here to Cierra Prime and informed the Port Authority. They opened the pod in this special room. We’re still at the Port Authority’s office, in fact.”

“I see…” She nodded slowly, contemplating my explanation.

“When someone finds a cold-sleep pod in space, they have a responsibility to take care of the person inside for about a week,” I continued. “That means I’m here to protect you. I have two female crewmates on my ship, so they can help you out in ways that I can’t. Unfortunately, we don’t have any open rooms, but the girls’ rooms fit two people. If you’re uncomfortable with staying on a man’s ship, we could also find you somewhere to stay on the colony.”

“Oh, no. That’s fine by me.” The fact that she didn’t ask what I meant showed that the whole *girl on a man’s ship* thing really was common knowledge.

“Really? Well, hold your decision until you see the place, at least. I’m taking care of you for now, but if we can contact your grandfather, that’ll probably be the end of that. Until the count comes, though, I promise to keep an eye on you.”

“Is that so? You’ll really protect me, Sir Hiro?”

“Yeah, I will. It’s only for a limited time, but I’ll be like your knight in shining armor, I guess.”

Chris looked a bit nervous, so I knelt down next to the cold-sleep pod, put my hand to my heart, and swore my fealty or whatever. I couldn’t

blame her for being anxious about this whole situation, but hopefully my gesture put her somewhat more at ease.

"Ha ha! I feel like the protagonist of a holo-novel, having my own space-faring knight." Chris smiled at my exaggerated act. The mirth quickly died, however. "My knight, Sir Hiro. Please protect me."

"Uh, from what? My…lady?" She seemed to be playing along, so I kept the knight thing going. She was a child, after all.

"My father, Friedrich Dalenwald, was murdered by his own brother, Balthazar Dalenwald," she said. "Space pirates weren't the ones who attacked us; his soldiers did. My uncle wanted the heir and his daughter killed."

Say what, now?

"Huh?" I cocked an eyebrow. "Uh, is your memory okay? I hear crazy stuff happens in cold-sleep pods."

"No, I'm certain of it," Chris said. "Our attackers were clearly after me and my parents. My mother was shot first because she protected me, and then my father sent me away."

That explained why and when the pod's distress signal emitter had been cut off: Chris's father must have destroyed it to keep that Balthazar guy from finding her.

"My uncle probably knows I got away. No doubt, his men are still searching for me in this very system."

"Oh. Awesome." I covered my face in despair.

A familial dispute among nobles. This wasn't big trouble—this was *huge* trouble. *Haven't I been caught up in enough trouble in this universe already? All I wanna do is kill crappy pirates, save up my money, and eventually buy a detached house with a yard on some residential planet so I can drink soda happily forever.*

"I'm sorry to be such a bother." Chris offered a pained grin. "Please, forget all I just told you."

How could I do something like that? With a ship like the Krishna, how could I abandon a little girl clearly in need of protection? Me, the guy who helped Mimi. Me, the guy who saved Elma.

Absolutely not. I couldn't leave a cute damsel in distress.

Do I want to be a hero? Am I just starving for attention? Who cares? We men can't escape our primal instincts.

"I'll need a reward," I said.

"Oh?"

"I can be your knight for a while, but I'm still a mercenary. Knights and mercenaries both need to be paid for their work, don't you think?" I flashed a smile.

"Umm…"

"Anything is fine. In fact, I'd say it's time for us to negotiate. My lady, how do you plan to repay me?"

Chris looked around uneasily. Then she removed her necklace and handed it to me. A translucent, purple jewel hung from a heavy chain. It looked expensive, but I didn't have any idea how much it was worth. If a girl of her status was wearing it around, though, it definitely wasn't junk.

"This is my treasure." She stared at it forlornly, but she bravely tried to mask her sorrow.

"I'll take this just for now," I said. "We'll get the real reward from your grandfather. Once I've finished protecting you, the necklace is yours again, my lady." I set the necklace in my pocket, and Chris offered me the back of her hand.

Am I supposed to kiss it? That's a little embarrassing, but I guess I have to. As a Japanese man, I know when I've just gotta do what I've gotta do.

I suppressed my shame, took Chris's hand, and kissed the back of it softly.

"Ha ha!" She giggled. "This really is like a holo-novel!"

"Do you enjoy books, my lady? Uh, is this how pretentious imperial knights act?"

"Maybe? I've never seen one myself," Chris said, cradling the hand I'd kissed against her chest.

Is this what noble girls like her dream of? Men just dream of girls wearing nothing but a T-shirt or an apron.

"That's enough of this for now," I said. "We might not be together long, but it's nice to meet you, Lady Chris."

"And you too, my knight. But you don't have to call me that." Chris's cheeks flushed as she smiled at me.

With things settled for now, I hurried to get Chris and me back to the ship. After all, her crazy, murderous uncle had to be watching the Port Authority like a hawk to see if anyone brought her in. If she'd been in that pod for three months, it meant that her uncle had had plenty of time to set up a network of surveillance.

My stomach clenched. I was in for a whole new world of trouble with this one. What was I supposed to do?

Chapter 2:
Christina Dalenwald

"THAT TAKES CARE of the paperwork," Bruno declared. "I'm sorry to trouble you, Lady Christina."

"Oh, no," Chris replied. "I should be saying that to you."

Her awakening meant there was a lot of bureaucracy at a government office to deal with. We had finished all the work on our side, but she'd had some to do herself. I did consider sneaking out with her before anyone from the Port Authority returned, but that would only cause more trouble, so we called Bruno and the others instead.

Bruno and his subordinates took notes on how Chris felt when she woke up, explained that she would be under my protection for a while, and gave us a quick rundown of the space-rescue laws relevant to our situation.

Chris had mentioned that her mother was shot and her father had helped her escape with the resolve to die himself, but she said nothing about Balthazar Dalenwald's plot. She must have known that telling Bruno and the others would do nothing to help. It was just a family feud between the Dalenwalds, after all, and it

wasn't up to her to make it public; it was up to her grandfather, the count.

"I would like to call my grandfather, Count Abraham Dalenwald, but…"

"Of course," Bruno answered. "The best we can do for interstellar communication is a holo-message, but it *is* possible. Do you know his address?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "I would like to include my guardian in the message. We have some family matters to discuss, so I would like for us to be the *only* ones who see it."

"That's just fine. We have a holo-message recording room you can use for privacy, and we will immediately encrypt the contents of the

message.” Bruno shot a quick glance at me, probably wondering why I got to be included in family matters. He then gestured to his subordinates, who left, presumably to set up the room.

Holo-messages were pretty much the same as video calls. The only difference was that they displayed a three-dimensional image.

“His residence is on the third planet of the Dexar System,” Chris said. “Count Dalenwald of Dalenburg. His communication code is ADK-4330208.”

“Good, good. Just a moment… It seems the message will take five days minimum to send,” Bruno said as he typed the information into his tablet.

“That’s a long time,” I mused.

“Messages sent within a star system are much faster, but when they need to travel thousands of light-years away, well…even using hyperspace communication and gateways takes quite some time,” Bruno answered with a shrug.

Gateways were basically man-made wormholes that were fixed in place, allowing things to move hundreds or thousands of light-years in an instant. It was similar to hyperdrive, which used hyperspace as a sort of high-speed highway to go faster than light. The difference was that these wormholes literally warped you to your destination.

The theory behind them was something like bending space and poking a hole in it, then connecting two points, but I didn’t really understand it. All I knew was that gateways were strictly controlled by the empires who owned them, so they weren’t easily used by mere mercenaries.

As it would take a whole five days to send the message, the fastest Chris’s uncle could get to the Cierra System would be ten days. Add in the preparations and gathering staff and supplies for the journey, and it was starting to look like we would be spending at least two weeks together.

“Five days…” Chris sighed. “Then Hiro’s duty will be done before my uncle can come to pick me up.”

“Don’t worry,” I said reassuringly. “Do you think I’m cruel enough to throw you out into the world all alone?”

“I thought you’d say as much.”

“She’s a wily one, isn’t she, Bruno?” I smirked.

“Leave me out of this!” As an upright worker for the Empire, he likely wanted to avoid offending a noble.

He guided us to a mostly white room. Its walls were adorned with square tiles about thirty centimeters on each side with a black point at the center of each—probably sensors for the holo-message cameras. There was a console set up in the middle of the room, with a basketball-sized blue ball buried in the front of it.

“This is my first time recording a holo-message,” I said.

“Is it truly?” Chris asked.

“Maybe sending messages to faraway acquaintances isn’t much of a commoner thing? I’m told a lot of people never leave their colonies.”

“I see… You may be right.”

As far as I knew, the only ones who left their colonies for other star systems were mercs like me, cargo ships, outlaw-like scavengers, actual-outlaw space pirates, merchants and firms who traded between systems, and members of the military. Oh, and maybe researchers.

“Let’s get to it, then. One and done, right? What should I talk about?”

“I will explain the situation, and then I’ll introduce you. As long as you offer a short introduction, you’ll be just fine.”

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I looked over Chris’s shoulder as she operated the console. *Hm, the controls seem simple enough. I don’t see any major differences from the video cameras I’m used to.*

“Let us begin recording now. Hiro, stand behind me, to my left.”

“Understood.”

Numbers appeared on the blue ball when Chris pressed a button, signaling the start of a countdown. When it reached zero, the recording began.

“It’s been a long time, Grandfather. It’s me, Christina. I’m sorry to have worried you, but I am safe. I was amazed to learn that three months have passed since our ship was attacked. My father ejected me from the

ship in a cold-sleep pod, and I've just awoken. I'm sending you this message from a holo-message recording room in the Cierra System's Port Authority office. The man standing behind me is Hiro, the man who recovered my pod. He is a member of the mercenary guild. I'm told he found my pod amid space pirate cargo. If not for him, I would have been awoken by the pirates and put through unthinkable horrors. In two ways now, I owe him my life." Chris then nodded in my direction.

I nodded back, stepped forward, and turned to the blue ball. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Captain Hiro. As Lady Christina mentioned, I belong to the mercenary guild. My mercenary rank is silver, and I own the small battleship Krishna. As is my responsibility, I will be protecting Lady Christina for the coming week. I will use whatever is at my disposal to protect her until you are able to retrieve her, even if it takes longer." I put a hand to my heart and bowed.

Chris's hand touched my hip. Taking that as a signal, I straightened and stepped back.

"Though you have not met him, I believe Hiro is trustworthy. At least, I'm certain he isn't one of my uncle's men." She took a deep breath. It was time for her to implicate her uncle.

"Grandfather, my uncle was the one who ordered the attack on us. They dressed themselves like pirates, but my father knew at a glance that the ship belonged to Balthazar. After our cruise ship was disabled, the men who invaded us were much more organized than pirates, and they were suspiciously focused on my family. My mother took a bullet for me, while my father fought valiantly to protect me as the pod left the ship. After my escape, I imagine he…" Chris paused and shook her head. "I expect my uncle is after me now. Hiro knows the circumstances, and he has promised to protect me. I will entrust my life to him but seek your help as well. I hope you consider this plea." She bowed, ended the recording, and shivered, her hand still on the console, perhaps feeling heartbreak or renewed terror at the thought of her uncle hunting her.

I couldn't let her suffer, so I gave her a little pat on the back. "Let's go, Chris. I'll show you around the ship."

We had to explain everything to Mimi and Elma. Also, Chris only had the clothes on her back, so we would have to get her the daily

essentials. She was a little shorter than Mimi, but Mimi's clothes wouldn't fit her body. Elma was too tall for Chris to wear hers. We'd have to buy her clothes. I didn't want to go out too much, but it was unavoidable.

"Okay." Chris turned around, wiping away tears. She'd taken something out of the console—probably whatever device the holo-message was stored on.

"I wish I'd brought a handkerchief. Sorry for not having the presence of mind to bring stuff for you."

"Ha ha! A knight must learn to be gentlemanly. You'll need some practice, Sir Hiro."

"The road to knighthood is tough, huh?" I chuckled. "Anyway, once we send that holo-message, we should meet up with Elma."

"Who is Elma?" Chris cocked her head; she must not have remembered Elma from the first time she'd woken up.

"She's one of my two crew members," I explained. "Elma is an elf woman with more mercenary experience than me. She lost her ship, so for now, she's in my crew."

"A woman… Oh. I recall you said you had two female crew members?"

"Yeah. The other one is Mimi; she's learning to be an operator. The poor girl is an orphan. We met each other a while back, and she ended up on my ship. If you want to know more about them, you should probably ask them." I didn't want to share anything I wasn't supposed to.

"So you *do* have two women on your ship."

"Uh, yeah. Again, ask them."

Chris looked calm, but for some reason, I felt intimidated, as if a giant snake were staring me down. *It can't be… Am I being overpowered?*

"Hm, very well. We noblewomen are open-minded. You could call it a man's nature, I suppose."

"Er…?"

She didn't seem as intimidating now, but her choice of words was weird. Maybe because of her age, she wasn't used to interacting with men

she wasn’t related to.

We spoke to one of Bruno’s subordinates outside the room and had him guide us back to Bruno, where we made the preparations to send the message and finish up our time with the Port Authority.

“Where is Elma?” Chris asked on our way out.

“In her last message, she said she was heading to the mercenary guild…” I pulled out my handheld terminal and opened the messaging app.

BEEEAAM!!

AAAAAAHHH! You're gold rank noooooooow!

Her funny little one-eyed alien was now shooting a beam from his eyes, mowing down an entire city.

Uh, okay?

***

"So…" I began.

I sent Elma a message saying that I was going back to the ship with Chris, and we left the Port Authority building. Immediately, I noticed how many pedestrians there were and how many of them were staring at us. *What? Is it so weird for a merc and a high-class lady to be seen together?*

On the outside, it was very close to looking… Actually, it *did* look bad. But we had similar hair and eye colors, so maybe we had a chance of looking like siblings?

Or are our facial features too different?

"What's the matter?" Chris, standing beside me, casually took my hand.

Reassured by the sight, the eyes gathered on us began to dissipate.

"Nothing. Uh… It's not *nothing*, I guess, but…"

"Hm?" She looked up at me curiously.

Aww, cute. I mean…no, not cute! I'm innocent!

"I just think…your uncle's underlings might have eyes on us," I said, and she stiffened, apparently having not considered the possibility. She clung to my arm and looked around nervously. I hated to scare her without good reason, but telling her now would keep her alert. "Elma is better in situations like this. I can do ship fights and power armor, but fighting bare-handed is not my thing." I touched the laser gun at my hip; if things got really bad, I'd have to use it. "Though I doubt they'll come at us in a place this populated," I added. "Let's just be careful. Once we get back to the ship, we'll have the advantage."

“Okay!” she chirped, grabbing my hand again. It was important to hold hands in order to prevent any surprise kidnappings.

“Let’s go.” We nodded to each other and started walking. I was amazed she wasn’t crying; noble girls might have been prepared for these types of situations. She looked like the preteen she was, but her calmness was more mature, which was helpful.

“I don’t know if we’re being tailed,” she said, worried.

“Me neither. I don’t think I would lose in a shoot-out, but there’re too many people. The thought of someone hiding in the crowd and getting too close to us scares me. I guess I should’ve trained for situations like this.”

“Is Elma used to situations such as this?” Chris asked, looking up at me.

I nodded. “Kinda. It’s more like she’s more suited to them than me in general. Her long ears aren’t just for show, and she’s a good brawler. I should have learned martial arts or something.”

“I recommend swordplay. A knight must have a sword, no?”

“I’m not interested in being a real knight, but…swordplay, eh? Would that help me? I’m not too sure about bringing a sword to a gunfight.”

The high-emission lasers shot from guns moved almost at the speed of light. They landed as soon as you fired, so as long as you aimed right, dodging was impossible.

“The best swordsmen can use their swords to defend themselves from laser gun and rifle fire. The best of the best can even reflect the lasers back.”

“That’s insane.” I looked at Chris, silently asking if she was telling the truth, and she nodded.

What is this, some Galaxy Wars *craziness? Holy cow. I do not wanna be up against someone like that.*

“A lot of nobles receive brain implants to improve their cognitive function,” Chris explained. “As a side effect, their thoughts are accelerated.”

“Wow, really?”

“I can’t be too sure of the specifics, as I don’t have an implant yet, but they say the sensation is like slowing down time. My father told me that’s what allows them to deflect lasers and swing their swords faster than the eye can see.”

“Hmm…?” *Isn’t that the same thing that happens when I hold my breath? If I held a sword, maybe I could do the same thing. Not that I’m planning on it.* “So I shouldn’t assume I have the advantage just because I’m using a gun and the other person is using a sword?”

“Exactly. My uncle is a master of dual-blade combat.”

“I’ll be very careful around him.” With my sense of danger renewed, we headed back toward the Krishna. I had to slow down so Chris could keep up, which meant we hadn’t made it very far. She had short legs, so I couldn’t really blame her.

“I’m sorry for slowing you down,” she said.

“You can’t help it, so try not to worry. Do you want me to carry you?” Chris looked light, and I had been working out every day since coming to this universe, so I could get her back to the Krishna with ease.

“Th-that would be rather embarrassing…”

“For sure. Anyway, let’s hurry. Once we turn left up there, it’ll be straight ahead.”

“Okay. I’ll do my best.” Chris sped up slightly, and I kept pace.

I kept my eyes peeled, staying on guard—and made eye contact with a police officer. “Damn, it’s the pigs,” I groaned.

“Oh?”

“He’s coming over here!” My heart rate skyrocketed. *Is this love? No. I’m just terrified that I’m about to get arrested.*

“Erm, Hiro?” Chris raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Why not just give him the reference data that the Port Authority issued to you?”

“Good idea!”

He asked a lot of questions, but once he compared my data with the data issued by the Port Authority, he nodded and offered to escort us back to the ship. I'd really thought I was done for back there, but we made it there safely.

***

"My name is Christina, but please, call me Chris."

"Hi, I'm Mimi! Nice to meet you, Chris!"

"Name's Elma. Good to meet you."

Mimi and Elma had been waiting when we arrived at the Krishna. Once the policeman had seen the welcome party, he'd nodded to Chris and gone on his way. *Good work, my man.*

At present, we were making official introductions in the cafeteria. Mimi seemed happy to meet someone closer to her in age, as she was outright beaming. I was older than Mimi, and Elma was older than me. At least by a generation, certainly.

"What?" Elma glared at me, having figured out what I was thinking as I looked at her; maybe her ears were sensitive enough to hear my thoughts.

"Nothing."

"Erm… Are those two okay?" Chris asked, noticing the tension between us.

"They're fine," Mimi said kindly. "Trust me, they're really good friends. Elma's just a little bit frustrated since Hiro was promoted to gold rank today."

"I'm not frustrated." Elma turned away from me, puffing out her cheeks a little.

Man, I wanna poke those cheeks. But I won't, or else she'll break my finger off.

"What is this 'gold rank' referring to?" Chris tilted her head.

I guess noble girls wouldn't have any reason to know about the mercenary ranks, so I should… You know what, I'll let Elma explain.

Elma whipped around excitedly, and I decided to keep quiet. "The mercenary guild has five ranks: iron, bronze, silver, gold, and platinum." She raised one hand, slender fingers extended. "Iron ranks are full-on newbies. They don't have much experience in battle, and their ships probably suck. Most of the time, they help guard merchant ships and do some transport work. At this stage, you're basically just flying around, going to stations, and trying to get experience anywhere you can."

"I see." Chris was listening intently.

I realized that I hadn't had a chance to explain Chris's circumstances. I decided to do it after Elma finished her explanation. As Elma continued, I sat Chris down at the table and started making a light meal and some tea for all of us. *Custard ought to do it,* I thought, unsure how Chris was feeling. Our lovely high-performance automatic cooker, the Steel Chef 5, made godly food.

"Once you reach bronze rank," Elma said, "you're a proper fledgling. Most people upgrade to ships that can handle battle, so they get counted as a real fighting force. Still, it's hard for a single ship to take on multiple pirates at once, so most will either form a squad with other mercs or make a temporary party during pirate-killing missions."

"Master Hiro destroyed a lot of pirate ships when he was bronze rank," Mimi said.

"Yeah, he committed rank fraud." Elma glared at me, and I shrugged.

I didn't do anything! Really, it was all thanks to the Krishna. To this day, nobody had even broken through the shields. But maybe it *was* partially thanks to me, since I hadn't done anything stupid enough to put the shields in unnecessary danger.

"Then, you've got silver rank. That's where you find most mercs. Get enough experience in bronze rank, and if your guild recognizes you as skilled, you're promoted to silver. There's a big difference between newbie and veteran silver ranks, though. We veterans have more experience, and once you've been a merc long enough, you get a strong ship and strong

gear. Some people say silver rank should be divided up more, or that the conditions to promote someone to silver should be stricter."

"And you're silver-rank, Elma?" Chris asked.

"That's right! I'm a silver-rank veteran." Elma puffed out her chest, all proud.

"Though she's part of my crew for now, since she lost her ship," I said.

"Ugh… Yeah, it happens. As long as I'm alive, I'll make it work." Elma looked away. To be fair, she was totally right.

"Then what is gold rank like?" Chris asked, urging the conversation forward.

Elma gathered herself and continued, "Gold-rank mercenaries are people beyond veterans. Rake in more experience, kill a lot of space pirates, keep at the bounty-hunting grind, take a really difficult simulation test, and then you can join the ranks of the top mercenaries. Only a handful can be promoted to gold rank—not even 5 percent of all mercs are gold rank."

"Wow, 5 percent. I'm a pretty big deal." I smirked. Considering how many mercenaries there were, 5 percent had a whole new meaning.

"Yeah." Elma rolled her eyes. "You're a big deal. Getting gold rank means the guild thinks you're a first-rate mercenary. Mercs aren't exactly low on the social ladder, but gold-rank mercs are worth attention from nobility, the military, and bureaucracy. Generally, people would say a gold-rank mercenary can do a large-scale pirate-killing of over thirty ships alone."

"Pssh. Easy peasy."

"I think you could defeat more than fifty pirates," Mimi said.

"As long as I don't have to fight them head-on, anything goes." The Krishna's shields were strong, but they still had a limit. I wouldn't want to deal with fifty ships at once, though. I would separate them all, pick off the medium crafts, and then start going at the smaller ones.

"Finally, platinum rank," Elma said. "Only thirteen mercs have earned it. They say only the most successful of the gold ranks get promoted. Kinda like gold rank, the platinum-rank requirements aren't widely

publicized, but if you can go into *any* battle, win big, and come home safe, then you have the makings of a platinum-rank mercenary."

"Do you think Master Hiro could do it?" Mimi asked.

"Oh, totally," I bragged. "I so could."

"They say platinum-rank mercenaries have a lot of political sway. I don't know if it's true or not, but I hear nobles have tried to use their authority to boss some platinum-ranks around and gotten wrecked in the process."

"Sounds fake to me." Even the highest-ranking mercs in the guild couldn't have that much authority, right?

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, you're gold rank now. Congrats."

"Weren't you mad enough to burn a city to the ground?" I teased.

"I'm not mad, okay?! I'm just jealous!"

"Aww. My rank being higher doesn't change the fact that you're the senior merc. Isn't that riiight, oh, senior of mine?"

"Are you messing with me? It feels like it. You've got nerve, bub."

"Gaaaah?!" Elma's arm snapped out and coiled around mine like a snake. In an instant, she had me in an arm lock. She was too fast; I didn't even have a chance to react.

"Elma, that's enough…" Mimi said, trying to calm the raging elf.

"Th-they do get along, don't they?" Chris asked, chuckling nervously.

"Tch! Don't get carried away, Hiro! You're good at flying your ship and fighting in power armor, but don't forget who's better in hand-to-hand combat!"

"I'll take that to heart…" I said. "By the way, Miss Elma, I made some sweets while you were talking. Perhaps you would like to partake?"

"Sure, why not?" She shrugged. "Go get them."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

Heh. That's right, be all smug. I'll make you cry later tonight. Dark, vengeful desires swirled in my heart as I brought the custard and tea to the

table. “It’s a bit early for dinner, so how about some snacks?” I offered. “Let’s talk about Chris’s situation while we eat.”

“Okay,” Chris replied.

“Her situation?” Elma looked suspicious.

“Um?” A question mark practically floated over Mimi’s head.

Yep, we have a whole star system’s worth of trouble on our hands. Get ready for this, girls.

***

“Hic! Chriiis!”

“Mmph?!”

After hearing Chris’s story, Mimi started crying and hugged the little girl. It was a nice gesture, but Chris was nearly suffocated by Mimi’s ample bust.

“This sounds like a whole galaxy’s worth of trouble.” Elma sighed as she rescued Chris from Mimi’s embrace.

“Aww, Chriiiiiis!” Mimi pressed her face to Elma’s shoulder and continued to wail.

“So we’re keeping this girl for…two weeks minimum?”

“Seems like it,” I answered. “We have to protect her.”

“We’re definitely getting wrapped up in something bad, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” If I were Chris’s uncle, I’d do anything in my power to get rid of her, no matter the cost. He’d already gone after her parents; not expecting him to finish the job would be downright silly. “Elma, there’s actually something I need from you.”

“What is it?”

I turned to Chris. “You kept a record of the holo-message, right?”

“Yes, sir. It’s right here.” Chris pulled a thin, quartz-like plate from her pocket.

Is that how they store information? It’s really pretty.

“Can you copy this?” I asked Elma.

“Yeah, sure, I can probably duplicate it.”

“I want to send this to Chris’s grandfather using as many methods as possible. The Port Authority sent it to him, but it might be intercepted by her uncle along the way, and I want to have a backup plan.”

“Gotcha. I’ll copy it and use every method I can think of to send it to Count Dalenwald. That’s all you need?”

“Yeah. Spare no expense and put it all in my name.”

“Just as soft as ever, huh?” She smirked.

“That’s not it. The count and his granddaughter will owe me a favor, and if we can protect her, I see big rewards in our future.”

“Yeah, yeah. If you say so.” Elma grinned at me.

She sees right through me, doesn’t she? I can’t help it; I could never abandon a cute girl in need.

“Do you have any connections that could help?” I asked.

“Yeah, a few. It’ll just take some time.”

“Guess that’s a given. As long as one of them gets through, we win.”

“I have some decent ideas, though I don’t know if they’ll work.”

“Let’s see where it gets us. If your methods don’t work, we’ll find another.”

The simplest option would be to kill anyone who chased us, including Chris's scummy uncle if possible. Not that I expected it to be so easy.

"First things first: What's their first move?" I asked.

I figured shutting ourselves in the Krishna would be safest, though things would be easier if we could communicate directly with Chris's grandfather. It seemed odd that a universe with such advanced technology would have such inefficient communication methods.

"If Chris's uncle is as dangerous as you say, then I wouldn't say we're safe in here," Elma said. "What if someone poisons the food we order? Or they could put a bomb in our resources, and bam, we're dead."

"Would they go that far?"

"There's no reason not to. We would probably be better off using pirate cargo to stock up instead of shopping in the colony."

"Wow. I've never thought of killing pirates for food and resources." But they did drop food and water pretty often, didn't they? Going to other star systems for groceries might be worthwhile too.

"Regardless, we need to make the first move," Elma declared. "I'm off. Chris, I'll need that storage device. Also, can you tell me his communication code?"

"Yes, thank you. His code is—"

"Careful," I warned. "They probably already know Chris is here."

"Yeah, I know. Don't worry about me." After receiving the device and the code, Elma left the Krishna.

What needs to be done around here?

"Mimi, could you help Chris get her sleeping arrangements settled?"

"Yes, sir."

After Mimi and Chris left, I started thinking about what fighting Chris's uncle might look like. *Hmm… I doubt we'll be doing any sumo fighting. Fighting without power armor, scheming, and assassinations aren't really my specialty fields. You know exactly what my specialties are, though.*

“How do I lure them out?” I wondered aloud. The moment I started thinking, my eyes were drawn to the tablet Mimi left behind. On its display was an advertisement for the Cierra System’s many resorts. I was suddenly inspired. *That might not be a bad idea…*

“Maybe having pursuers wouldn’t be so bad after all.” A grin crept over my face as I muttered to myself in the empty cafeteria.

***

While I borrowed Mimi’s tablet and looked around the resort planets’ brochures, the girls returned to the cafeteria, having found a place for Chris to sleep and finished their tour of the ship.

“Heya,” I said. “Sorry, I decided to look at these brochures on your tablet.”

“Oh, it’s okay. Is now really the time to think about vacation, though?” Mimi asked.

I smiled. “You’d think not, but it might actually be the perfect time.”

“Really?”

“I can’t say for sure yet; we can talk about it when Elma gets back.”

“Understood!” Mimi said. “Oh, Chris and I were talking. Should we really wait for her grandfather to come to us? What if we tried to go to him instead?” Mimi cocked her head, and Chris stared at me.

“I thought of that too, but I didn’t look into it too much; it just didn’t seem logical before.” I returned Mimi’s tablet to her. “Let’s explore it now. Open the Galaxy Map—it was the Dexar System, right?”

“Yes, Dexar,” Chris answered.

Bruno had said it would take five days for a message to go through hyperspace communication and gateways. If my calculations were correct, and I remembered the map, physically getting to Dexar would be really annoying.

“Chris, I need you to remember: Did you use any gateways to get to the Cierra System?”

“Oh!” She gasped.

“Why do you need to know that?” Mimi asked.

“Look at the Galaxy Map and you’ll see. Find the shortest route from here to the Dexar System.”

“Hm…? Very well. I’ll give it a try.” Mimi worked on her tablet, her brow furrowed. Before long, her eyes widened with shock. “E-excuse me? It says it will take forty-two days just to get there.”

“Wow. That’s farther than I thought.”

“Why is it so far? One-way communication takes five days, and it would take two weeks for her grandfather to arrive, right?”

“It’s a question of whether you can use gateways.”

“Oh!” Mimi clapped her hands together in realization.

To use gateways, you needed the Empire’s permission. The Imperial Fleet’s ships and nobles’ ships, along with travel cruises, scheduled flights, and sightseeing ships, could use them, but mercenaries like us couldn’t get permission that easily. Chris could help us on that front, but if we threw out requests with her name on them, her uncle Balthazar would be on our tail in seconds. And the routes to each gateway were likely littered with traps, making them a risky option.

Depending on how desperate her uncle was, it was possible that we would be totally unable to even get close to one. We could slowly make our way to the Dexar System using hyperlanes, which would probably be safer. Hyperlanes were arranged in a grid pattern, so there was more than one route to the Dexar System.

For Balthazar Dalenwald to achieve his goals, he would have to finish Chris off *and* keep her grandfather, Count Abraham Dalenwald, in the dark about his nefarious plot. That would actually be pretty dang difficult. He would want to finish Chris off as soon as possible to try to keep her message from reaching Abraham—otherwise, he was done for. In that case, taking our time to prepare would be dangerous. Given how cornered he was, he would probably do anything in his power to get to us.

“Mimi?”

“Yes, sir! What do you need?”

“Get us a reservation on a resort planet. There are three in this system, right?”

“That is correct. Which should we choose? And, erm, should we not talk to Elma about it first?”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I figure acting as soon as possible is the best course of action,” I said. “Go for all of them.”

“Huh?” Mimi looked bewildered.

“Send requests to all of the planets. Make sure you pick multiple travel agencies and reserve docking spots all over the place. The more, the better.”

“Umm, that’s going to cost a lot of money. Why do you want so many reservations?”

“To try to throw the enemy off. Here’s my plan: We make multiple reservations on resort planets and prepare a bunch of places to stay. Then, we go toward the resort system in plain view, prompting the enemy to attack. I’m confident we won’t lose as long as we’re in the Krishna. Once we deal with anybody following us, we can be on our way. The enemy will have to check every single place we have reservations at, so that’ll buy us time. Meanwhile, Elma uses her connections to send info to the count.”

I spread my arms out as if to say, *So, what do you think?* Both Mimi and Chris tilted their heads in contemplation. It was kinda cute how they did it in sync.

“I think it could work if we can defeat the people following us,” Mimi said.

“What about the cost?” Chris asked.

“I’ve got 17,000,000 Ener, so that’s no problem.”

“Hmm?” Chris cocked her head again. The sum didn’t seem to mean much to her. What could you expect from a sheltered noble?

“It looks like hotel expenses in the resort galaxy are 10,000 to 30,000 Ener per person. I think we’ve got more than enough, even if we get a ton of them. Besides, I’m planning to bill Count Dalenwald for the expenses, plus my bodyguard fee.” The hotel expenses weren’t ideal, but we had to be happy with what we had.

“Do you need to make more than one hotel reservation?” Chris wondered. “As long as we can defeat any pursuers, they won’t be able to bother us no matter where we stay, no?”

“Under any other circumstances, I’d agree with you, but what happens if the enemy is willing to do anything to get to you? They could use illegal methods to extract information from the travel agency. I think it’s best to have a few decoys to make sure we’re safe.”

“I see…” Mimi paused, thinking. “But they can’t touch us while we’re in a hyperlane, correct? Instead of spending all of that money, would it not be safer to simply use hyperdrive over and over?”

Hiding in hyperlanes was a totally viable idea, and I hadn’t thought about it. My thought process was the product of my experience in *Stella Online*. Hyperdrive was instant when one was in-game, but in this universe, it took hours and hours, and unlike FTL drive, hyperdrive couldn’t be interdicted. For buying time and staying safe, it was kind of perfect.

“That is a great idea, but there’s the problem of resupplying. After our resupply in the Arein System, we came here without stopping once.” We couldn’t have foreseen our current troubles, and we were eager to enjoy our vacation, so we hadn’t thought about making another stop along the way.

“Hmm… Yes, going more than two weeks would be impossible with our current reserves. Shall we stock up first?” Mimi asked.

“If Elma’s right, then stocking up in this colony will be risky, but we can try to go to a neighboring system and resupply there. Also, while we won’t be attacked in hyperdrive, it’s possible for people to ambush us as soon as we drop out, kinda like when we came to this system.”

“Urk. Yes, that is true.” Mimi frowned as she recalled the space pirates who’d attacked as soon as we reached the Cierra System.

Would we be better off if that hadn’t happened and we hadn’t met Chris? She would still be in big trouble if we hadn’t, so I was going to call it a good thing.

“Urgh… I have nothing to add to this conversation.” Chris sighed in frustration. Unlike Mimi, who had been on the Krishna for some time now, Chris was still ignorant of mercenary work. She wouldn’t be able to offer much help in these talks.

“We can talk about all the details when Elma gets back,” I said. “But for real, we’re going to have to consider the possibility of close-quarters combat. I’d better go check my equipment.”

“I will help!”

“Um, let me help too!”

The two raised their hands. *I’d rather not have help, since there’s a lot of dangerous stuff in there. Mimi might have to use it at some point, though, so I should let her familiarize herself with it.* “Mimi’s fine. But Chris, why do you want to help?”

“I can fight when the going gets tough!” Chris wrung her little hands, mustering up her valor.

If that happens, we’ve failed as bodyguards. But I’ll find something simple for her to learn, even if I have no idea what will actually be useful against her uncle.

The three of us went to the cargo hold. Though we mostly used it for its intended purpose, it also served as storage for weapons and power armor, as well as the laser launcher from the bioterrorist attack on Arein Tertius, Elma’s laser rifle, and some other ground-combat weapons.

“Wow, it’s incredible,” Chris said, awestruck. “Are all of these weapons?”

“For the most part, yeah,” I said. “It’s almost all dangerous, so don’t touch anything carelessly.”

“Yes, sir.”

I started checking the gear. You already know about the power armor and laser launcher, so let’s start with the laser rifle. It had more power, output, and range than a laser gun, as well as rapid-fire capabilities, making it better in every way. One could freely change its magnification level, and it came with a multi-scope that had a night-vision mode and an infrared-sensor mode, making it useful for long-range sniping.

It was more unwieldy than a pistol, so you couldn’t lug it around the city. Some colonies had banned carrying them outright. Even in ones where they were legal, you could expect to be stopped and questioned by every

policeman who saw you, since laser rifles were a little too big for "self-defense."

The next weapon I checked was…a ball. Not the kind you could throw at little aliens to catch 'em all—it was a kind of grenade that used light and sound to disorient someone. Kind of like a stun grenade. Let's call it a shock grenade, actually. Press the button, throw it, and it shocks everything in a five-meter radius.

Traditional explosions in spaceships and colonies could lead to major trouble. Blowing a hole in a structure like that would kill everyone inside. In *Stella Online*, shock grenades were used in place of the frag grenades from other games, though I didn't yet know if the same was true in this universe.

I gave the girls simple explanations on both the laser rifle and shock grenade. We couldn't test them inside the ship, so I had them hold the rifle with the safety on and throw dummy grenades around instead.

Next, I taught them how to use rescue nanomachines. They weren't weapons, but they came in a syringe that looked like a gun. When it was pressed against a wounded person and the trigger was pulled, the nanomachines would relieve pain and perform first aid. They wouldn't keep someone injured alive if they kept pushing, but it *could* potentially save them from dying. That is, assuming it wasn't an instantaneous death. We would prefer to never have to use the nanomachines, but things happened, and it was best to be prepared, right?

"You're better off knowing how to use rescue nanomachines and shock grenades for now. That'll help with support, at least," I said.

"Yes, sir." Mimi saluted. "I will practice my throws!"

"I'll practice too," Chris said.

"The grenades are really strong once you can aim accurately and around cover. They're simple to use, so I'd be more comfortable with these in your hands than laser rifles." They couldn't use the grenades if the enemy was too close, but if the enemies got that close to Chris, we were in trouble. "Remember where we keep these, and if the time comes, come and get them. Don't take them to your room, though. They're too dangerous."

"Yes, sir."

“Understood.”

Neither Mimi nor Chris was the type to make mischief, so I doubted I would have to worry about them.

While I finished looking over the gear, my handheld terminal dinged. Mimi received a notification on her tablet as well, so it must have been a message from Elma. I pulled my terminal from my jacket pocket and read the message.

They’re already following me.

Well, that was fast. Had they already IDed us? We should’ve expected as much, especially if they had eyes in the Port Authority.

I asked: *What should we do? Do you want me to come and get you?*

I’m fine. They won’t attack me in a crowded place. I just can’t believe they acted so fast. No rest for us, huh?

Would it be too dangerous to resupply?

Too risky, I’d say. I’m gonna get back there ASAP. Would hate to get attacked right now.

Gotcha. Be careful. Turn on your location sharing and make sure you can send an SOS.

Understood.

With that, our text conversation ended. Chris’s uncle really did act fast, and it was becoming clear that we needed to do just the same.

***

About ten minutes after our text conversation, Elma returned to the Krishna. “I’m back,” she announced.

“Hey! Good to see you’re safe.” I tried to give her a hug, but she avoided it. *Why?!*

“What’s your deal?”

“I was worried.”

“It’s not worth worrying over. Jeez, you’re too kind in some ways and not kind enough in others.” Elma grinned wryly and gave me a little hug and a peck on the cheek.

What is this fluttering in my chest? It feels like we’re playing the wrong roles here. Gah, how did this sad little elf make my heart skip a beat?!

“What?” she demanded. “Look at me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“It’s nothing!”

Elma tried to circle around me so she could see my face, but I kept it hidden and headed to the cafeteria.

“Oh? Elma, welcome—” Mimi paused. “Um, what’s happening?”

“Hiro’s acting all shy. He can be surprisingly cute sometimes.”

“I’m not shy!”

“Weren’t you worried about me?” Elma teased.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“That’s not what you were saying a minute ago.” She circled around me again, smirking.

What an annoying woman. But I’m a big boy, so I won’t cry!

“Hiro here is adorable, isn’t he?” Chris giggled.

“This is a new side of him,” Mimi chimed in.

They were dogpiling on me, but I refused to give in.

“Anyway!” I said, changing the subject. “Let’s work on our plan. Time is of the essence right now, and we don’t want the enemy getting the initiative; that would spell disaster.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Elma rolled her eyes. “Do you have a plan, then, big guy?”

“I have a few, though I’m not totally confident in any of them. First…” I told Elma all about what Mimi, Chris, and I had talked about and asked for her opinion.

“Luring them out and taking them down doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Elma replied. “Taking down their spies in general is the best plan. We’re stuck under their surveillance if we stay here, so going out into space is a good strategy.”

“The problem is resupplying, then.”

“Yeah. Our current supplies won’t last us two weeks. If we can get to the resort planets, we might be able to resupply there. We’ll have to be wary, but they can’t possibly be in all of the resorts. If our only objective is resupplying, then honestly, going two systems over would be best.”

“Two?”

“Two,” she repeated. “They might have their claws in neighboring systems. There are three systems surrounding this one, but once you get *two* systems over, you have a lot more options. They probably can’t cast their net out quite that far.”

“I see.” I hummed thoughtfully. Elma’s explanation made sense. “Okay. Should we give up on the resort planets, resupply two systems over, and then start hiding in hyperspace?”

“That’s the hard part. Moving around will leave a more obvious trail, so defeating our pursuers and then running to the resort planets could be the safest idea. They have great security.”

“Huh. How great?”

“They host powerful people from the Empire, nobles, and sometimes even foreign VIPs. The security level is really high. If some terrorist incident happened there, it would be a major blow to the Empire’s prestige.”

This was news to me. The heightened security wasn’t mentioned in the brochures. Talking with Elma was definitely the best way to strategize.

“So no lazy resort vacation, huh?” I sighed.

“Yep… Chris’s grandfather is going to pay our expenses, right?”

“Erm, I will try to persuade him as best I can,” Chris said. She didn’t have any real authority, so trying to persuade him was the best she could do.

“What kind of budget should we work with?” I asked Elma. “Maybe 3,000,000?”

“That’s a little much… How much was it per person for two weeks?”

“Between 20,000 and 60,000 Ener,” Mimi answered. “There is no real maximum in the expensive places, but that is the average range.”

“Four people would be 80,000 to 240,000, then,” Elma calculated. “Include dummy reservations at all three grades for each planet, different travel agencies, different facilities, and put them all in different names. About 80,000 Ener for two weeks in Mimi’s name, 160,000 in my name, and 240,000 in Hiro’s name. Multiply by three, and that’s one 1,440,000 Ener. Should be enough, right?”

Mimi grimaced at the sum. “That is some extravagant spending…”

I wasn’t sure if my math was correct, but I thought that would be about 144,000,000 yen. Spending that much in *Stella Online* would get you a beginner multi-role ship or battleship, though it would not cover customizations and insurance in case you got it totaled.

“That’s nothing to a count of the Empire.” Elma smirked. “He’d pay that in a heartbeat to protect his adorable little granddaughter.”

“Do nobles really have that much money?” Mimi asked.

“They can move way more money than us. You could say a merc’s valuation of money is close to a noble’s.” Elma shrugged at her.

I think my perception of money is the same as when I played Stella Online*…though I guess it wasn’t exactly normal to begin with.*

“I’m having trouble wrapping my head around that amount,” Chris interjected. “That is a lot of money, is it not?”

“Yeah, it is. At your age, you might not have a noble’s inflated view of money yet. You’ve probably never spent your own money, have you?” I asked, prompting a nod from Chris. Girls her age weren’t exactly spending a lot of time shopping. Everything she had would’ve likely come from her parents or servants. “Okay. So we book nine resorts in total, and then we only use one of them?”

“No, let’s actually book one more: a classy resort. Might as well round out our expenses at 2,000,000. The four of us can share 560,000 Ener on a two-week trip.”

“That’s a lot for two weeks…” I shuddered—56,000,000 yen would be 14,000,000 per person—1,000,000 yen per night. Since I was an average guy in my past life, I never could’ve imagined spending so much.

“Don’t worry; as long as Chris’s grandfather pays up, it’s free!” Elma said.

“That’s a big ‘if.’ Let’s hope he’s a kind man. But hey, even if he doesn’t pay up, I’ll just consider it a mental health trip for the crew. A very…very expensive one.”

“You have this ship and the skills to make a lot of money, so get used to it,” Elma replied. “You don’t want people thinking you’re stingy.”

“Really? Are you sure you’re not frivolous for being able to spend two million so easily? You must be a rich girl. And stop that nonchalant whistling!”

Elma looked away, trying to brush me off. But if she didn’t want to talk about it, then I wasn’t going to drag it out of her.

“Still, it will be difficult for common folk to carry out a high-cost plan…” Mimi frowned, working on her tablet.

Oh, of course there’s a problem. I guess I should expect as much from a universe with an aristocracy.

“It’s cool,” Elma reassured her. “I have connections.”

“Seriously? What are your connections?” I asked.

“Every good woman has her secrets.”

“Every good woman…”

“Has her secrets?”

Mimi and Chris almost seemed to be taking notes from the smug elf. Elma was a good woman, sure, but I didn’t think they would grow up to be quite the same as her. *Well, who knows? Maybe Chris will.*

“Let’s leave it at that,” I decided. “Can I leave the reservations to you? Pull the money from my account as needed.”

“Sure, but what are you gonna do?” Elma asked.

“I’m the captain, so I’ll leave the boring paperwork to my crew and hang out with Chris.” I puffed out my chest.

Elma glared daggers at me, but I’d never been any good at paperwork. Planning out the resort trip wasn’t quite my thing either. As I

was the only man in a group of four, I figured the girls should pick things they enjoyed.

"True," she said. "I wouldn't want to entrust the planning to you."

"I don't think it'd be that bad…but okay. As your personal operator, I will do my very best!" Mimi said.

Honestly, if I were in charge of our itinerary, it would be two straight weeks of eating meat. *I wonder if I could drink carbonated soda on a resort planet. Ooh, now I'm getting excited!*

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Chris and I left Mimi and Elma in the cafeteria and headed to the cockpit. Mimi hadn't shown Chris the cockpit on their tour, so I decided now was as good a time as any.

"Wow. Is this the cockpit?"

"Pretty great, right? That's the main pilot's seat. Have a seat, if you'd like."

"May I?" Chris's eyes glittered with childlike glee.

"Absolutely. You won't get many opportunities to sit in the pilot's seat of a small battleship, so take this chance."

"Okay. Thank you!" Chris sat in my usual seat. She was way too small for it, but if I adjusted the seat, she might be able to just reach the console and controls.

"Let me adjust the seat right quick."

"Okay!"

I messed with the seat to move it closer for her. I wasn't worried about getting it back to how I liked it, as my data was programmed in, so I could return it with the click of a button.

"There. Wanna try flying it?"

"Huh?! M-me? Fly *this*?!" Chris looked up at me, wide-eyed.

“You’re not gonna *actually* fly; it’s just a simulation.” I sank down into Elma’s copilot seat, messed with the controls to pull up my data, and optimized it for my comfort. Then, I activated simulator mode.

“Wooow…” A simulation space appeared on the main monitor, so elaborate that it was nearly indistinguishable from reality. Chris was stunned by the sight, sitting in wide-eyed amazement.

“Let’s start with basic controls.”

I booted up tutorial mode. It gave her a simple lecture, starting with starting the ship. Once someone finished the tutorial, they could pilot the ship fairly well, if nothing else. I’d already had Mimi run the tutorial a few times so she could pilot the ship if Elma and I were out of commission.

Following the directions of the simulator, Chris did her best to clear the tutorial. Using the inertia control system, the simulator could even produce the feeling of accelerating and decelerating, making for a heck of a realistic experience.

“Wh-whoa!” Chris yelped.

“Calm down. It comes with an auto-balancer, so if you lose control or go into a spin, you can return it to neutral and the ship will stabilize.”

“O-okay!” Sweat rolled down her brow as she slowly got a feel for the controls.

I praised Chris more and more as she mastered each basic maneuver.

“Nice. You’re good at the fine movements.”

“That was a smooth turn. Keep it up.”

“Cool, you’re used to turning. Next, try to get the ship to the marked spot. Ooh, yeah, good stuff.”

I’m the positive reinforcement kind of guy; nobody minds a compliment, and it’s important to keep up motivation. After about thirty minutes, when she had finished the tutorial, we stopped the simulation.

“That’ll do it,” I announced. “Good work.”

“Thank you! But I feel like I can do more.”

“You might not think so, but controlling a ship takes a lot of concentration, especially the first time. You’ll feel plenty tired soon, trust

me.” I wiped some sweat off of Chris’s brow with my fingers.

Only then did she notice her current state, blushing as she wiped the rest away with a handkerchief. “E-erm, could you perhaps keep your distance from me for now?”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed, but you can go take a shower if you want.”

Chris shrank away and nodded slightly.

I led her to the showers, taking her through the cafeteria, where Elma and Mimi were still working.

“Uhh, Hiro?”

“Master…Hiro?”

I suddenly realized what Chris and I must have looked like. She was red-faced and sweaty, eyes cast downward in shame, and we were keeping an awkward distance between us.

“Oh, er, n-nothing happened,” I stammered. “I just had her practice a bit, since she was interested.”

“Practice *what*?” Elma looked at me so coldly, I was sure I’d freeze to death.

Gaaah! I should have taken a moment to choose my words more carefully! “Piloting the ship! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Master Hiro…” Mimi looked at me sadly.

I seriously didn’t do anything weird! It was easy to guess what they were imagining, but they were wrong. “I am not a crook!” I protested.

It took a mountain of effort to convince them of my innocence.

***

“You can see why I’m pissed, right?”

“It was our bad, okay?” Elma offered.

“I’m sorry…” Mimi said.

After clearing up the misunderstanding, I was still livid. I knew Elma and Mimi didn't trust me, since I was a sex machine, but it hurt that they thought I would ever touch a little girl, let alone one I was meant to protect. I thought Chris was cute, yes, but not in *that* way at all.

"Can't you trust me a little more? Remember, I didn't do anything to Serena when she was vulnerable, and I'm not gonna do it to Chris either. Besides, I imagine I'd get arrested in seconds if I touched any noble girl."

"I have no rebuttal…" Elma admitted.

"Yep…" Mimi said.

Doing anything of that nature to Chris would be ridiculous. She was even tinier than Mimi, and I wasn't that much of a monster. While I was being showered with apologies, Chris was taking her shower. It was only thanks to her that we'd cleared all this up.

"Let's just leave it at that," I sighed. "But seriously, girls, trust me a little more."

"All right."

"I'm sorry."

They bowed their heads in apology. It wouldn't be very nice to keep harping on it, and they'd learned their lesson by now. "Anyway, let's hear your reports. How's progress?"

"Sure," Elma started. "We got the reservations, so we can stay for two weeks starting the day after tomorrow. We were also able to get the total within the 2,000,000 Ener budget."

"Handling so much Ener at once was nerve-racking. My hands shook so much…" Mimi said. She looked totally exhausted and haggard.

Mimi valued money like an average person would, and Elma's attitude toward it suggested she'd come from a rich background. On top of that, she was a mercenary, so she didn't hesitate to pay out large sums of money. *How reliable.*

"We might have to entrust expensive shopping to you in the future, Mimi, so try to get used to it," I said. New ship purchases, customizations, and the like would take millions of Ener before you knew it.

“I’ll do my best…”

“How should we pass the next two days?” I asked.

“Good question,” Elma replied. “We should make sure the enemy knows we’re preparing to leave. If we want to take them all down at once, then it’s better to be open and brazen instead of doing things in secret.”

“But what should we do specifically? You were too scared to resupply as part of our preparations, right?”

“Yes. The enemy will know that Chris has told us everything by now, and that we’re on high alert. If they get the chance, they’ll go all out. Boring as it sounds, hiding in the ship might actually be the best idea.”

“Will we only be waiting today and tomorrow?” Mimi asked. “Two days doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Agreed,” I chimed in. “We’re stuffed in here longer than that during hyperdrive, anyway.” With Chris around, we wouldn’t be able to live how we normally did when we were stuck on the ship; not even I was crazy enough to indulge in degeneracy with her around. “By the way, what kind of place are we staying at? I skimmed over the brochures, but I didn’t check out the more expensive ones.”

“Oh, yes. Hmm…” Mimi hummed thoughtfully.

“What’s the point of knowing everything before we get there?” Elma shrugged. “That ruins half the fun.”

“Running around not knowing anything is just as bad. I’m Chris’s guardian for now, and I would feel more comfortable knowing what to expect,” I said with my own shrug.

Elma reluctantly agreed and glanced over to Mimi. Understanding the look, Mimi turned to her tablet. “We will be going to the ocean planet, Cierra III. The planet’s surface is over 80 percent water, and it has nothing resembling continents. For the most part, the land mass is made up of scattered islands.”

“I see. How do they manage that?” Smaller islands couldn’t possibly have staff from the resort company present all the time, right?

“They use management AI on larger islands not suited to be resorts, and androids and robots under the control of the AI take care of the people

staying there. Security is taken care of by unmanned drones and guard robots."

"That sounds like a really bad time if the AI gets hacked," I mused.

"It's not that easy to hack them," Elma argued. "The positron AI that manages the planet apparently has airtight security. You would need two positron AIs of the same level to crack it."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep. Like I said before, the resort planets host imperial nobility and foreign VIPs. They're going to go all out on security, trust me."

Fair, fair. It did sound safe. "If it's an ocean planet, then that must mean we can enjoy some seaside fun, right?"

"Yes!" Mimi was delighted. "We will be residing on an island of average size, with space for the Krishna to land. If anybody other than us approaches the island, they will be given a warning and then subjected to *forceful removal*."

"Whoa, that's scary."

"There are laser launchers disguised as cliffs, guard robots underground and in the water, and the like. Honestly, attacking a guest would be suicidal," Elma said.

"The security is scarier than I expected…" I shuddered. "But we get a whole island, huh? That's good." I had no idea how big an average-sized island was.

"It's the plan you paid for," Elma told me. "We can sunbathe on the beach, swim in the water, take nature walks, play around with cute little alien animals, and more."

"Ooh. Sounds like fun." I was interested in the alien animals. Hopefully, they wouldn't be like facehuggers or angry gremlins, or any of the other cute-but-dangerous creatures from movies. Imagine: you see something that looks cute, and then its jaw unhinges and it has four sets of teeth.

"The brochure says there's fresh seafood and delicacies from nearby planets too," Mimi added.

“Sounds right up your alley, Mimi.”

“It does!” Her eyes sparkled as she imagined never-before-seen space delicacies.

Fresh seafood, eh? Let’s hope it’s something I can stomach the look of. Although, as I am a dyed-in-the-wool Japanese man, I think I’ll be able to enjoy any kind of seafood.

We rejoiced over our coming resort plans, spending Chris’s first day on the ship in a festive mood.

Chapter 3:
Pursuers

THE NEXT DAY…

"Delicious!" First thing in the morning, Lady Christina here chomped into something like a hamburger.

Last night, we had the Steel Chef 5 make us some imitation hot dogs and pizza. Chris wasn't intimately familiar with the junk food creations of the automatic cooker and had been taken prisoner by their charms. According to her, eating such rich foods made her feel naughty. The automatic cooker made food that tasted almost exactly like the junk food I was used to, but it was all nutritious, so it wasn't actually bad for you. Truly the food of dreams.

"Are you sure about this?" Elma looked at me. "I don't want her grandpa getting mad at us."

"There's nothing wrong with learning what kind of foods the masses eat."

"We're the masses?" Mimi said. "This ship does have a high-performance cooker, after all…"

The cooker we had before the Steel Chef definitely wasn't bad by any means, but it was one or two…nah, three levels below the Steel Chef in terms of taste. The Steel Chef 5's creations couldn't be called those of the common masses.

We should have her try out the not-so-great food from a normal cooker some time. Maybe some of that gross stuff from Arein too.

Apparently, there were weirdos out there who would just open up their food cartridges and eat the contents as they were. According to them, the best-tasting ones were aged somewhere between one and two years. I didn't get it.

But I digress.

So how did Chris sleep last night? Any nightmares or anything? I asked Mimi, texting while I ate.

She's had no issues so far. She slept like a log. I guess she must have been tired.

Really? Good to hear. I was worried she'd have nightmares or flashbacks about the attack. It was the first night, though, so who knew what might happen.

"What should we do today, girls?"

"We don't have anything to do other than ship maintenance." Elma shrugged. "It's too dangerous to go out, and we don't know what they might try to do to our supplies if we leave the ship."

"Is it that easy to tamper with the colony's shipping system?" Mimi asked. It was a good question.

"I don't think it's easy, but they could put reactive explosives or something in our luggage, and then, bam, we're dead."

"It wouldn't matter from the outside, but even the Krishna can't stand up to explosions on the inside."

Reactive explosives were seriously dangerous weapons. They were like the reactive warheads installed in the Krishna, but smaller and easy to carry. They were strong enough to destroy half a colony, so it was technically illegal for anyone but the military to have them. And yet, Elma was confident they could be used against us.

"Would they go that far…?" Mimi seemed unconvinced, and I understood why. Chris had come aboard just yesterday, so it was hard to imagine that her uncle would have such plans in place already.

"They tailed Elma yesterday," I reminded her.

"Yeah, they're quick to move," Elma agreed. "Err on the side of caution, I say."

"Oh… True," Mimi said. "We shouldn't be careless."

"My survival alone will ruin my uncle," Chris added. "I believe we should act with the worst-case scenario in mind." After finishing her hamburger, Chris dabbed at her mouth daintily with a napkin. You could

really see her upbringing in how she ate. I would wipe my lips if I got food on them too, but with a lot less grace.

"Won't they get suspicious if we do nothing at all?" I asked.

"Don't worry about that," Elma said. "They know Chris has told us about what happened, and they expect us to be on guard. It'll look more natural if we stay inside like good little idiots."

"Can't argue with that." The moment we learned about the whole situation with Chris's uncle, we became his targets too. It would be natural to be scared motionless.

Chris's face clouded over. "I'm sorry for getting you all wrapped up in this."

"Seriously, don't worry! This guy here can't let girls like you go, anyway. It's pretty much… Yeah, it's fate that this would happen." Elma smacked me with a playful blow.

It was just beyond me to abandon cute girls in need. Keeping that policy might lead to a lot of trouble in the future, but I wanted to do what I could. And hey, maybe I'd get close to some cuties along the way. I loved Mimi and Elma, and I planned to take responsibility for as much as possible, but they were a separate matter. You never knew when you might die or end up in another world, so it was my policy to enjoy what I could, transitory or not.

I had also worked secretly with the mercenary guild to make sure that if I died or disappeared, ownership of the Krishna and my belongings would go to Mimi.

And Elma? She hadn't cut ties with her family or their connections, and if I died or disappeared, she could just stay on the Krishna with Mimi. Those two would manage together, so I hadn't done anything special for her. Mimi was all alone in the world and would need a home.

"Hm?" Mimi raised an eyebrow as I stared at her.

I shook my head to tell her it was nothing. "So basically, we're free today," I mused.

"Hmm… Should we hunt pirates?" Mimi asked.

"I wonder…"

If we went pirate hunting with the count's granddaughter on board, would her uncle take the opportunity to attack us? That might expose our combat techniques too. *It's nice to see Mimi getting used to the mercenary lifestyle, though. Why else would she suggest hunting just because we're bored?*

"Not a bad idea," Elma said, "but we don't want the enemy seeing our tricks. Let's just keep our heads down. At times like this, we should stay calm and ready." She pulled a beer out of the fridge.

Hey! "Really?" I sighed. "You just woke up."

"We can't go out, so what's wrong with having a drink? Put up the shields, and nobody will bother us."

"Yeah, I guess, but…" I pulled one of my non-carbonated sodas out of the fridge. I got one for Chris too. Mimi didn't like it, so I didn't push it on her. "Chris, if you're gonna have burgers, hot dogs, and pizza, then you've gotta have soda with it."

"Is that true?" Chris opened the bottle excitedly, raised it with both hands, and began to drink it down. "It smells like medicine…but it's quite sweet."

"Right? It goes perfect with burgers. Try it out during lunch."

"Okay!"

"Hiro…" Elma groaned. "First junk food, and now your weird drink? Stop giving Chris all that stuff—the count's gonna get mad."

"If you want to talk about teaching her the wrong stuff, then how about you stop drinking beer in the morning? C'mon, have some sense."

Elma locked eyes with me.

What? You wanna go? I can't beat you in a fight, so let's not, please. I raised both hands in surrender. Some might have seen it as pitiful, but Elma's joint locks *hurt*, even if there was no lasting effect or wound. She was practically an expert in it. What a rude gal.

Chris giggled. "You two get along so well."

"They do! Sometimes I get jealous."

"Don't you get along with him too, Mimi?"

“Erm, eh heh heh… Yes, I do.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks and smiled bashfully.

Ha ha! Mimi, you’re too cute.

“Hiro isn’t nice to me, and he never holds back,” Elma complained. “Be nice to me like you are to Mimi!”

“You’d hate it if I treated you like I do her.”

“Nuh-uh… That’s not true.”

“If you were as sweet in bed, I’d totally think about it.”

“Gah?! Wha—?! D-don’t say that in front of Chris!” Elma blushed furiously.

Aww, what’s wrong? Already tipsy?

“Th-this is quite the adult conversation…” Chris chimed in.

“A-ah ha ha…” Mimi laughed nervously.

Nah, just your usual pervy teasing. It’s fun to prod Elma—until she gets really mad, anyway.

We spent a second calm day caring for Chris. Although, considering we had the shields up, it would be a huge problem if things *weren’t* calm.

Chris and Mimi spent most of the day chatting in their room, and at dinner, they were both glancing at me, red-faced. *No way. Mimi, you’re not telling her about what we do at night, are you? Although there’s nothing I can do about it if you are. I’m never going to touch Chris, and I’ve told the girls as much. And she won’t try anything with me. She’s a child.* I acted as though I’d seen nothing, exercised, took a bath, and went to bed. Tomorrow was shaping up to be a big day.

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Hi! Good morning. It’s me, Hiro. The Hiro who, for the first time, locked his door before going to bed last night. The very same Hiro who, upon checking the door’s access log in the morning, shuddered to find two

entries in the middle of the night. What had happened? Who could it have been?

Still shaking, I went to the cafeteria to find Elma in a strange mood and the other two hiding their faces, as if they didn't want me to see them. When they all made eye contact with me, there was an uncomfortable silence.

"Let's just have a nice, calm talk," I began. "First off, I'm not going to do anything to Chris. Hell, I can't. That would be an awful thing for a bodyguard to do, and I don't wanna get in trouble with the nobility. If I were Chris's grandfather and I found out some crappy mercenary was taking advantage of my granddaughter, I'd kill him."

Mimi and Chris averted their eyes.

"And Elma, I locked the door last night because I thought something might happen. I wasn't trying to lock you out."

"Okay, no harm done." Elma's displeasure melted away, and she smiled at me.

"So anyway, uh…" I stammered. "Since Chris is here, we should probably avoid doing stuff."

"We don't have to be *that* considerate."

I turned to Chris. "Would it bother you at all?" She shook her head, face red. *What? Doesn't it bother you? That doesn't sound right. What's gotten into all of you girls?*

"I just feel rather left out is all," Chris said.

"Don't say that, ugh. It literally cannot happen, and I already told you why. You understand, right? And it's been *a single day*; you're going way too fast to begin with. I can see why you'd be overexcited with all that's going on, but you have to be calm. The suspension bridge effect might be partly responsible, given the dangerous situation we're in, but I'll protect you even without anything going on between us. All of this going on makes things less comfortable."

It was a stern lecture, but Chris still looked unsatisfied. Had her noble upbringing taught her all the details of sex? For her age, she was way too ready. Or maybe she was just too innocent to know better.

“Or,” I continued, “are you willing to prioritize your emotions and cause strife between me and your grandfather?”

“No…” she responded sadly.

“There’s a process to everything, okay? I imagine your grandfather has some noble pride or whatever. Wouldn’t he hate it if you did something really illogical in the spur of the moment?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Absolutely so. I hear the imperial nobility are very proud and upright.” I smiled at Chris, happy my attempt at persuasion seemed to have gone well. *Do I feel guilty for arguing with a little girl? Not at all! It’s for her sake, and for my own safety!* “Anyway, there you have it. Mimi and Elma, be careful not to give her any funny ideas. And I will be too, of course.”

“Urk… Y-yes, sir.”

“Loud and clear, boss.”

“Chris, you should watch yourself. I’m calm now, but a man’s restraint can be blown away with relative ease.” Especially mine.

“Mrgh… Okay.”

With Chris’s agreement secured, I worked out in the training room after breakfast and took my turn in the shower, getting nice and clean for the day.

“Is this how life is every day?” Chris asked.

“Yes. On this ship, at least,” Mimi answered, causing Chris to make a strange face.

“I always expected life on mercenary ships to be more…unrefined.”

“Trust me, no other ship has equipment this classy,” Elma said in an awfully negative tone.

What’s wrong with a nice living environment? We all get to enjoy good food, clean beds, and pleasant baths.

“Quality of life is more important than mercenary chic,” I declared. “Anyway, today’s the big day; we’re going to the resort. We’ll probably be chased, so be ready for that.”

Mimi braced herself. “Yes, sir!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Elma answered, bored. It would honestly have been a little bizarre if she were as excited as Mimi. She did her job well, so there was no reason for me to get on her case.

We all went to the cockpit, where I sat in the pilot’s chair, Mimi in the operator’s seat, and Elma in the copilot’s spot. We put Chris in the sub-operator’s seat. Now all of the cockpit’s seats had butts in them.

“Is it okay for me to be in here?” Chris asked.

“This is the safest place in the ship, and the inertial control system works best in here,” I said. “We can’t let you near the controls this time, though.”

I checked the Krishna’s status. There hadn’t been any attacks, which was to be expected on the colony. Still, we’d had our lowest shields up just in case. They most likely knew of our reservations and planned to attack us on the way. That would be less risky than attacking us here, as the Imperial Fleet would go hog-wild on them if they attacked us in the colony. And if they investigated the attack, the enemy would be done for before Chris’s grandfather even caught a whiff of the situation.

“Okay,” I began. “Mimi, let’s get that departure request in.”

“Yes, sir!” Mimi used her console to send a departure request to the Port Authority.

They gave us permission in no time, so we safely exited the port district. We had our shields at maximum so nobody could “accidentally” charge us and wreck us right then.

There hadn’t been any suspicious ships so far. *Are we being too careful? Nah, prudence is always good.* Small ships wouldn’t do too much, but a large container ship full of cargo would be a major problem if it charged into us.

“Phew,” I sighed as we left the colony. “That was nerve-racking.”

“It’s only just begun,” Elma said. “I’m going to put us on a difficult-to-follow route to the resort planets, so follow my navigation, Hiro.”

“Understood.” I moved the ship to follow Elma’s route, which would make it hard to figure out which of the planets we were going to. “Time for

FTL drive."

"Okay," Elma responded. "Charging faster-than-light drive now." I raised the generator output, and a high-pitched charging noise filled the air. "Counting down. Five, four, three, two, one… Activating FTL drive."

Boom! The Krishna entered faster-than-light travel, the stars melting into lines flowing behind us.

Chris gasped in amazement. "Wooow. So this is what faster-than-light travel looks like from inside a small craft!"

Did it look different from the windows of larger ships? "I've gotten used to seeing it, but the first time—" I started, but then alarms went off in the cockpit. It was the same alert we'd heard on our way to the Cierra System. "That didn't take long."

"Yep," Elma replied. "I thought they'd let us go for a while to see which planet we were going to, but I guess not."

"Maybe they figured it didn't matter, since they're gonna kill us and all."

The cockpit's main monitor showed a warning that we were being interdicted out of FTL drive. I could escape the interdiction if I really tried, but our plan was to kill our pursuers, so I let it happen like last time. It would be easier to recover from than being thrown back into normal space.

"Mimi, prepare for battle. Elma, control sub-parts. Like last time, we give no mercy."

"Understood!"

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

"Wh-what about me?" Chris piped up.

What about you?

"We're going to perform battle maneuvers, so try not to bite your tongue. The inertia control works well, so the g-forces on your body will be reduced, but they'll still be pretty bad when I do crazy maneuvers. Also, try not to scream too much."

"O-okay. I'll do my best," she replied nervously.

Screaming would mess up my concentration. Honestly, I'd been worried that Mimi would scream, but she never had; she just stiffened in fear and went quiet.

I reduced the generator's output and slowed the ship down, returning to normal space without resisting the interdictor.

Boom! The stars turned back to singular points. As soon as they did, I returned the Krishna to max power.

"Whoa, settle down there!" I took evasive maneuvers and turned on the weapons system. Just then, the place where the Krishna had been was pierced by several red rays of light. No warning whatsoever—they were out for blood.

"Enemy ships spotted!" Mimi announced. "Twenty small craft, four medium!"

"Deploying chaff," Elma added. "Flares and shield cells are ready anytime!"

"Okay. Here goes!"

I turned around, aiming my four laser-weapon arms and two flak cannons toward the enemy.

Time for a counterattack. I won't let a single one of you escape this sector!

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"They don't look like pirates!" I yelled, flying around in an attempt to throw off the incoming blood-red lasers. The twenty small craft were all middle-class battleships, while the four medium ships were all old but military-grade and still powerful.

"Their ships and equipment are too unified," Elma noted.

"And they're tough too."

The enemy small craft took our four lasers head-on. My lasers broke through their shields, but their armor withstood the attack. Pirate ships would have exploded almost instantly under a focused laser attack from the

Krishna. In other words, their shields, plating, or both were worlds apart from space pirate scum.

"How's their offensive power?" I asked.

"Their gear is one or two ranks higher than common space pirates," Elma answered. "Their shields have a high attenuation rate."

"Gotcha. Mimi, have you informed the fleet?"

"I can't! We're being jammed!"

"Sounds about right," I groaned.

Elma groaned as well. "Yep…"

If we could buy time, the fleet might notice the radio interference and step in, but it would be faster to deal with them ourselves. As long as I presented my flight recorder records, we wouldn't be blamed.

"Enough watching and waiting," I said. "Let's go! Chris, don't bite your tongue!"

"Aye-aye, Captain!"

"U-um, aye-aye!"

"Okay!"

I heard three distinct responses from the girls as I took minute evasive maneuvers, accelerating and braking as necessary, to shake up the enemy's encirclement.

"Woo! Here goes!"

I shot my four lasers and two flak cannons at one small ship before me. Then I used the resulting opening to escape. I had been firing sporadically and reflexively, so they were surprised by my sudden change of strategy, sending a ripple through their teamwork and creating an opportunity I could not miss.

"Let's start with the big boys!"

The medium ships peppered us with lasers, trying to keep the Krishna away, but I dodged them with a barrel roll and charged in. Any lasers I couldn't dodge were deflected by our shields. Meanwhile, I picked a ship to zero in on.

Still, the medium ships were tough. I hit one with two waves of heavy laser fire, but it refused to go down. They must have had shield cells. *Buuut…*

"How about some of this?" I gave them a load of the two large flak cannons installed on the front of the ship. The countless bits of shrapnel broke through their weakened shields and filled the body of the ship with holes. Flak was weak at a distance, but in close-range combat, it had unparalleled firepower.

"I'm gonna stick to these medium ships," I informed the girls.

"Let's see what you've got," Elma replied.

I circled around the downed ship, cutting myself off from the small enemy crafts as I closed in on my next medium target. If I stayed close to the other ships, the small ones wouldn't be able to shoot the Krishna. If they shot at me and were willing to hurt their friends in the process, hey, that was all right with me. As such, I was able to mow down the enemy medium craft while being careful to take cover from smaller ones behind them.

"What a dirty way to fight," Elma said accusingly.

"Look, you've gotta be creative when you're outnumbered." Otherwise, we would get shot down in an instant. The Krishna's shields were strong, but they still had their limits. "What's our damage at?"

"We've been shot a few times, but our shields haven't gone down yet," Elma replied. "They can't shoot us much, for fear of hurting their allies." She operated her console at blinding speed.

I was taking evasive maneuvers to keep out of the enemy's sights, but it was impossible to dodge every single light-speed laser coming this way. When we were hit, Elma would strengthen shield output in those spots for a moment and use shield cells to replenish them, controlling the amount of damage we took. She also tricked enemy aim by using chaff and electronic countermeasures.

"Whoops!" While I fought close to the enemy medium ships, the smaller ships ran out of patience and came my way. They were doing all they could to peel me away from the medium ships. "Fools!"

I used the altitude control boosters to do an instant turn, turning my flak cannons against the incoming ships. Then I fired away. Shrapnel cut through their shields and filled them with holes. They looked like Swiss cheese with a slight metallic finish.

"Nice, nice. I know how they move now, so it's almost time to counterattack." I stuck to the back of the escaping medium craft, showering incoming small ones with heavy laser fire. If they didn't go down in one volley, well, I was willing to give them another!

"You drive like a madman," Elma said. "How are you able to stick to them while facing away?"

"I've figured out the radar and their movement quirks." It was kind of like walking backward while using your phone. Get used to it, and you could do it with ease. Outer space just had more directions. A friend and I had practiced this backward-floating, forward-shooting style endlessly in *Stella Online*. "It's about time I crush these guys."

As the enemies had decreased in number, I shot down the medium craft I was sticking to, finishing it off. Then it was time to mop up the smaller ships. Medium craft were slow, so without their front line of small craft, they were much easier targets, though they could still pack a punch.

I charged into the remaining small ships and peppered them with flak as I passed by. Some tried to escape, but I hit them from behind with heavy laser fire. Medium ships tried to use heat-seeking missiles as a last resort, but I dragged them behind me and flew back into the cloud of small ships, deploying flares as I went, causing the missiles to harm them instead. With their numbers so low, it was a throwaway match now. Before long, we finished destroying all of the ships.

"That was pretty tough," I sighed. "Their training and equipment were way better than average."

"Yeah…" For some reason, Elma was frowning.

"Th-that was scary…" Mimi was pale from the drawn-out battle.

The last time we'd had such a close fight was probably when we jumped into the Federation fleet at Tarmein Prime. This time was a little easier, since we didn't have to use anti-ship reactive missiles.

“Let’s go recover our spoils quickly. Those data caches will be decisive evidence for Chris’s grandfather. The small craft probably don’t have anything, so I’ll just go for the medium ones.”

“Aye-aye.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

I brought the Krishna over to the enemy’s ships and harvested what I could. They had good equipment, so I would’ve loved to take some if we had the time, but staying too long could attract the fleet, and I didn’t want to pay off these guys’ damages. We split up the work and grabbed food, water, and data caches from the four ship carcasses. With three people controlling drones, each ship was quickly cleaned up.

“The data caches are nice, but they probably don’t have much else that’ll be useful. I doubt they were on orders to stay out here for long,” I commented.

“I disagree,” Elma said. “Medium ships usually have a crew of four to eight people, y’know. They’re supposed to keep two weeks’ worth of resources in stock, just in case their propulsion systems fail.”

“Is that so?”

On closer inspection, Elma was right, and we found more food and water than I expected. Four medium crafts’ worth of stuff could last us a month with ease.

“This was a bigger haul than I expected,” I said, satisfied. “We could just live off these resources and run around until Gramps gets here.”

“If hiding in the resort planets doesn’t work, then let’s do that.”

Once we got the loot, we quickly went back into FTL drive and left the battlefield.

“Now we can rest easy. Are you okay, Chris?” I looked over at Chris, who just nodded.

Her face was whiter than a sheet. She had both hands on her mouth, probably trying her best to obey orders and keep from screaming. I then turned to Elma, who was drinking from a straw jabbed into her gravity sphere, composed as ever. I still thought that the drink holders that always held your drink upright were really cool. Mimi had already calmed down

and was checking over the resources we'd recovered and our ship's status. She was becoming quite reliable. Before long, she could call herself a full-fledged operator.

"I'll get our navigation set up again," Elma told me. "Be careful of your angle when you approach the planet."

"Leave it to me."

On planets with atmospheres and high enough gravity, you had to manage your entry angle carefully, or you'd be in big trouble. The Krishna had safety systems and shields, however, so even charging into the planet in FTL wouldn't cause us to explode or burn up in the atmosphere. Still, ship behavior changed once you entered the atmosphere, and if you tried to fight the air resistance, you'd crash into the ground. Or decelerate into a rough stop.

I followed navigation for a while until a blue planet came into view. Almost the whole surface was covered in water. We had reached the third planet of Cierra III.

"Okay. Time to land!"

"Aye-aye, Captain. I'll support the landing. Mimi, watch what I do," Elma said.

"Okay!"

We decided to leave the quivering Chris alone as we began our descent to the resort planet for a well-deserved vacation.

Chapter 4:
The Resort Planet Cierra III

AFTER TAKING DOWN our pursuers, we were on a descent trajectory to Cierra III: our vacation destination.

"These resort planets really do have tough security systems," I noted. "I'm not gonna kill us by landing, am I?"

Their positron AI, or whatever it was, controlled an auto-interception system. If you got too close, your ship could get shot down, and you'd be screwed.

"It'll be fine," Elma assured me. "Once we access the resort planet's AI and put in our security code, the defense system will put us on a whitelist and defend us instead of attacking us."

"What a well-made system…" Mimi said in admiration.

I glanced over at Chris, who was totally listless after the stress of battle. *Was Mimi like this after her first battle? I kind of remember her having a little more dignity, but it's different for everyone. Ah, well.*

There was another boom as the ship left FTL drive. Onscreen, we saw Cierra III, fully covered in water.

"How do we access the management AI?" I asked.

"It's the same as when you land at a colony. Mimi; open the comms list. Cierra III's management AI should be on it."

"Okay. Hmm… Oh, there it is! I'll connect now." Mimi worked the console and accessed the planet's AI. After a few exchanges between her and Elma, we were given permission to land.

"Oh, yeah!" Elma exclaimed. "I'm pretty sure I've used auto-docking to land effortlessly before."

"Really? Then let's do that." I activated the auto-docking function, and the ship began to automatically adjust its entry angle and speed of descent to land safely at our destination. Easy peasy.

Before long, we reached the atmosphere. There was a rumbling noise as the Krishna started shaking, which grew more intense until finally, the scenery outside of the cockpit's window turned red.

"Whoa, so this is atmospheric entry. Is that the shield turning red-hot or what?" I asked.

Elma shrugged. "Even I don't know."

The ship's body shouldn't be touching the atmosphere directly, thanks to the shields, so we won't burn up in here, right…? Or maybe the shields are just turning red due to some reaction with the atmosphere? I couldn't tell, but the feeling of entering the atmosphere was truly unique.

"A-are we in danger?" Mimi asked.

"The Krishna itself shouldn't face any trouble. The shields are a bit weakened, but the ship is undamaged so far."

Suddenly, Chris screamed. "Whaaaat?!"

"Whoa?!" *Wh-what the heck?!* I looked over, and she was covering her mouth with both hands and blushing. Why was she acting so weird?

"Oh!" Mimi gasped. "Umm, Chris seems to be having some trouble. I will take her to the med bay."

"Uh…? Okay."

She jumped out of the operator's seat and helped the slouching Chris out of the cockpit. Chris didn't look too good.

"Think she's okay?" I asked Elma.

"It's nothing." She looked at me and shrugged again.

What? I can't help but feel like I'm the only one out of the loop.

Fwoooooom! I heard something that sounded like friction between the Krishna and the atmosphere. *The vibration has finally slowed down, at least. But hmm… Oh, that's it!* "Did she wet herself?" I asked.

"You're supposed to pretend it didn't happen!"

"I can't help that I noticed, but I do have the sense to not say it to her face."

Chris was a noble girl, but she was still a normal person. When she saw flesh-melting lasers coming her way, she was probably terrified. The Krishna's thick shields wouldn't let enemy laser fire through that easily, but it was still scary when they hit. And I couldn't just evade them all, given how fast they went.

"Anyway, wow. This is my first planetary landing since I came to this universe. It's pretty hype," I said, changing the subject.

I worked my console to display the Krishna's photosensor readings on the main monitor. Cierra III's surface was over 80 percent water, and its atmosphere and ocean's chemical compositions were terraformed to be optimal for life. It was a bit smaller than Earth. The photosensor's readings were all ocean, as far as the eye could see, minus a few islands dotting the water. Apart from the excitement of my first landing, it was a really great sight.

Mimi returned with Chris in tow. Chris seemed calmer now, but her face was still flushed.

I'll pretend I didn't notice.

"Are you okay? Your first fight must have been rough."

"I-I'm fine. I had a drink in the cafeteria, and now I've calmed down."

"Good." I grinned at her. "Mimi, thanks for looking after her."

"Of course!" Mimi smiled broadly at my praise. If she had a tail, it would be wagging like mad.

"Mimi, is this your first time on a planet?" I asked.

"Yes! I've lived on a colony or ship all my life. This is wonderful. I'm not sure whether to call it big or…magnificently vast. Even the image in the sensor looks so open."

"From my point of view, in this universe—*ahem*, uh, colonies are stranger than planets."

"Do you come from a planet, Hiro?" Chris cocked her head.

I threw out a vague answer. "Yeah, kinda. Uhh… Yeah. Complex circumstances, y'know." I'd almost revealed my perspective on "this

universe.” I didn’t want anyone unnecessary knowing that I came from another universe. I liked *not* being a guinea pig, thank you.

“I see. But if you’ve lived on a planet, does that not make you nobility?”

“I don’t think so. But either way, I’ve kinda left my past behind me.”

“Oh, okay.” Chris seemed disappointed for some reason. What was that supposed to mean?

“By the way, what is this resort facility like?” I asked. “I’ve left it all to you girls, so I don’t know much about it.”

“That is true,” said Mimi. “It seems we have some time until we arrive, so I’ll explain.”

“Yes, please.”

“Leave it to me,” Mimi brought up a bird’s-eye view of the resort on the cockpit’s monitor. She scaled it down, showing that it wasn’t a very big island. You could probably walk from one end to another in under an hour.

“It’s surprisingly small,” I mused.

“Yes, it’s a facility for family use, and we have it all to ourselves!”

“Really? The whole island?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, hey, that’s big enough.”

“Agreed.”

We were paying 560,000 Ener for four people to stay for two weeks. That meant 140,000 Ener per person, making 10,000 Ener per day. That would be 1,000,000 yen in modern currency… But maybe that was cheap to have all your needs met and meals prepared?

“The main facility is, naturally, the seaside lodge where we’ll stay. The beach in front of it is perfect for taking a dip. There are also tennis courts, a personal gym, sports and recreational facilities, and a shopping mall just for us. There are also hiking trails for us to enjoy the nature of the island.”

“A mall…?” Putting a shopping mall out just for one family was insane. How could that possibly make a profit? Truly, rich people in science-fiction universes had it all.

“Yes, a mall. We can buy clothes and the like there.”

“Wow, neat!” Elma piped up. “Maybe we could dress up for once.”

“Sorry. I’ve got zero fashion sense,” I said.

“If you’d like, I could pick out the perfect outfit for you,” Mimi offered.

“Ooh! I want to try too!” Chris added.

“Sounds like fun,” Elma said.

Why do I feel like I’m about to be treated like a mannequin? Meh, future Hiro can deal with it. I’ll just be quiet, as long as it’s nothing super crazy. It’s not a good idea to defy women at times like this.

“Whoops, we’re about to land,” I announced. “We’ll probably be fine, but brace for impact just in case.”

As the Krishna descended further, the world around us started to look like the island Mimi had put on screen. Part of the island was a bay, where the waves were gentle. The water was perfectly clear, and the white sand was almost blinding. It was a tropical resort right out of the movies. Our lodge was visible, close to the beach. Next to it was a huge area that looked like a heliport. Was that our landing pad? In the center of the island were golf courses, tennis courts, and other structures. *Is that the shopping mall over there?*

“Chris, was your last vacation like this?” I asked.

“Yes, though the island was a touch larger.” That was nobility for you—her family must have rented out an even more luxurious island.

The Krishna smoothly and automatically lowered onto the landing pad. *Thump!* The ship shook as it touched ground. *Ah, auto-docking, you are the best. Even when there’s higher gravity to worry about, you never fail to make a soft landing.*

“We have landed!” I declared. “Boy, am I tired.”

We'd managed to get through the fight without the Krishna getting damaged, but our pursuers were more trained and better equipped than space pirates. They really had come for blood at the start too. The Federation scuffle might have been an easier time, after all.

"I'm sure you are, after putting in all that work," Elma said.

Mimi nodded. "Great job today. Get some good sleep tonight."

"Thank you for protecting me, Hiro," Chris added.

Ha ha ha! Selfish as it may be, I don't mind doing all that work; with you cuties around, my fatigue just melts away. They knew exactly how to make me happy.

"C'mon, keep that up and I'll be grinning like an idiot." I blushed. "Let's go ahead and stretch our legs. Do we need to take anything out of the ship?"

"Hmm…" Elma thought it over. "I think we'll be fine. But if you want to be prepared for attacks, we could take the weapons and power armor with us."

"That's a bit loud for carry-on luggage…" Mimi winced. It was rare for Elma to miss the mark.

Maybe she was right, though? We ought to check out the island's security and consider bringing our own weapons and armor. If the enemy knew where we were staying, there wouldn't be much point in coming down and fighting. Instead, they'd likely use an asteroid or something to bombard us from orbit.

Could they do it with a laser cannon? I figure the atmosphere would reduce its power… Nah. In this universe, laser cannons must be strong enough to cut right through the atmosphere. After all, even handguns can kill people with ease.

"He seems to be thinking about it…" Mimi observed.

"I meant that as a joke," Elma said.

"Did you? I thought you were serious…"

"If they threw a reactive weapon down here, we and the Krishna would be gone in a snap," I said. "Power armor won't save you from that."

“How blunt,” Elma muttered.

“I don’t want to imagine that.” Mimi grimaced. I was probably making the same face. Even Chris went pale.

Regardless, I didn’t know what to take with me, so I just wore what I usually wore into colonies and left the ship. All I carried was my handheld tablet and laser gun. Elma did the same, while Mimi had a shoulder bag with her tablet in it. Chris was empty-handed.

Should I let her borrow my tablet so that she can message us?

We threw open the Krishna’s airlock and went down the accommodation ladder.

“Mmm,” I moaned. “The air is nice, and the sea smells great.”

“It feels so much freer on the surface,” Elma said.

“Wooow…” Mimi looked up at the sky with stars in her eyes. She must have been fascinated by the sky after spending her whole life under a ceiling.

Chris closed her eyes as the wind caressed her cheeks, possibly lost in memories of vacationing with her parents.

While we were all enjoying ourselves, something came flying out of the lodge. *What is that, a robot?* It was a metallic mass the size of a volleyball. The mysterious thing stopped in front of us and began emitting light, scanning us.

“Dear guests, allow me to be the first to welcome you. I am Cierra III’s management AI, Milo. I take care of all who stay on this planet. It is good to meet you.” The thing floated in midair as it spoke. It had an androgynous voice.

Is this basically like a terminal to access the planet’s AI?

“Nice to meet you, Milo. I’m Elma.”

“Um, hello. My name is Mimi.”

“I am Christina.”

“And I’m Hiro, this ship’s captain.”

“Yes. Ms. Elma, Ms. Mimi, Ms. Christina, and Mr. Hiro. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.” It bobbed up and down, as if bowing its head. How meticulously made. “If you have any questions, I can answer them now. Otherwise, I would like to show you around the lodge. Will that do?”

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I was the first to ask Milo a question. “Should we bring anything from our ship?”

“Yes. We have all sorts of amenities available to make your stay comfortable, but some customers have specific preferences; if you do, you will have to supply your own items. Also, in the case you decide to use our extra services that are not included in the base price, you should carry your terminals with you in order to process the transactions involved.”

“Gotcha. Do we need changes of underwear?”

“No, we will prepare new clothing for you. But again, we understand that people have their own preferences. If necessary, we suggest you bring your own. However, we do have boutiques and the like that you are free to make use of. They carry not just underwear and everyday clothing, but also lovely swimsuits for pleasure and excitement.”

“Okay, cool. That’s all I wanted to ask.” I glanced over at the girls, but they shook their heads to signal that they had no questions. Maybe all of this was in the brochures? I didn’t exactly read them carefully.

“Then let us proceed to the lodge. Come right this way.” Milo turned around in midair and floated along the path. We followed behind.

“Wow, wow! Look at those plants!” Mimi pulled at my arm, pointing at the flowers and trees along the path. As the only plants we’d seen in colonies were potted ones for decoration, this must have been Mimi’s first time seeing such lush vegetation.

“Yeah, it’s awesome. You can really feel the life of the vegetation here. Hey, Mimi. Did you know that plants are so strong that their roots can break right through asphalt and concrete? It’s crazy how life perseveres,” I said.

“Those are materials used to pave and build buildings, correct? Incredible…” The rest of us looked on disinterestedly as Mimi admired the sights, but she didn’t notice us. It was adorable how she reacted to her first true taste of nature.

“We have arrived,” Milo said. “Allow me to show you around.” A slender arm emerged from Milo’s spherical form and opened the door to the lodge.

How does that fit in its little round body? Is there anything else in there?

The lodge was like a log cabin, and the inside was very spacious. There was a vast common area that functioned as a living room, dining room, and kitchen. A big wooden coffee table was up front, with a soft-looking couch surrounding the low surface. To the left was the big kitchen space and dining table. The kitchen had not just an automatic cooker, but also a normal range and oven. If we wanted, we could do real cooking.

Behind the low table and sofa was a lawn, and beyond that, a gorgeous sandy beach. There were beach chairs by the window, perfect for sunbathing. To the right was a wooden staircase that went up to the second floor. There was also a hallway leading to other rooms on the main floor.

The interior design of the cabin had a tropical theme, right down to tiki-esque statues. There were also wooden bows and such on the walls. Since this planet had been developed by terraforming, I couldn’t imagine they’d ever needed weapons like those.

“Love how spacious it is,” Elma said. “The wood is luxurious too.”

Mimi was oddly scared. “I-Is this wood? Eep…”

“Those of us who live on planets are used to seeing it, but wood is a very rare material on colonies,” Chris explained.

“Interesting…” I said.

Taking wood into space did sound like a poor bang for your buck, especially if plant material wouldn't last long out there. You might as well just use whatever ore could be mined in space. Although I had to wonder if you couldn't culture plants in a universe this advanced. Would it be easier to create substitutes at that point? Lumber was easy to work with and took little effort over time. If someone were to use a synthetic alternative, plastic might be the cheaper option.

While I thought to myself, the girls finished their inspection of the common area. They looked awfully satisfied, and for good reason; the place was much bigger and more luxurious than the Krishna. I especially liked the sense of spaciousness caused by the big windows and high ceilings. What a lovely building.

"The current time on this island is 11:14 a.m.," Milo informed us. "If you all would like, I can prepare lunch for you at noon. Is that an acceptable time?"

"Sounds good to me. Girls?"

"Fine with me."

"I don't mind."

"That time works for me too."

"There you have it. Noon, please," I told Milo.

"Very well. At noon, I will prepare lunch. Until then, I hope you enjoy yourselves." Milo flew over to a pedestal in the corner of the room and slipped into it. It was no longer active and moving, but I knew it would respond if I called its name.

"Let's rest until then, ladies. I'll grab a drink and hang out on the couch."

"I think I will too," Elma said.

"Excuse me?" Mimi chimed in. "May I walk around outside?"

"Go ahead. I think it's fine, but do be careful. Don't go scavenging either."

"I won't! I'm not that much of a glutton!" She puffed out her cheeks, miffed.

Ha ha ha! You're cute even when you're mad.

"How about you, Chris?" I asked.

"Umm… I will go with Mimi."

"Are you sure? Don't push yourself."

"I'll be fine, thank you. Do not worry." Chris smiled elegantly.

Yep, there's that air of nobility—you can tell her background with ease. Meanwhile, look at this damn elf over here, stretching out on the couch. Not a lick of refinement there.

After seeing Mimi and Chris off, I called out, "Milo?"

"Yes, Captain Hiro? What can I do for you?" The robot rose up from its spot and flew toward me.

So it is *listening!* "I'm thirsty. Do you have drinks available, or are we supposed to order them?"

"Yes, sir. We have all of the standard drinks in the refrigerator. The stock within is based on the service plan you've purchased, but we are able to procure other drinks for a fee."

"Huh. Do you have carbonated beverages?"

"Yes. However, we do not have them in the refrigerator, as they are not often requested."

I almost jumped for joy on the spot. Soda might not have been a standard drink, but Milo knew what it was, which meant…

"So I can order it?"

"Yes. I can certainly bring it to you. What flavor would you like?"

"Sweet, brown soda that washes over your throat like nectar. I want soda. I wanna drown myself in soda. Hell, fill the whole fridge with soda, if you want. That's how bad I want it. Feel me? Give. Me. The. Soda."

"Your request has been received. Please release Unit 006."

At some point, I had grabbed Milo with both hands. *Oops! I kinda went crazy there. It's just because I've been away from my beloved soda for so long.*

“What size would you like? We have 1.5-liter and 500-milliliter options.”

“I’ll take twenty of the 500-milliliter ones.”

“Understood. It will be a short while until your order arrives. As for payment—”

“Take it.” I pointed my terminal at Milo. It began to flash again, before making a *ba-ding!* noise. What a cute little transaction. “Heh heh heh… I’m so excited, I’m practically shaking!”

Elma shot me a look. “Is it that big of a deal? I thought your carbonated drinks or whatever weren’t real, but if Milo knows about them, they must exist after all.”

“Of course they’re real! Soda cannot be vanquished! Even in post-apocalyptic worlds, it clings to life!” Even if it did make your pee a weird color.

“I can’t keep up with your hype, but okay. I’ll be excited with you. You’ll let me have some, right?”

“Absolutely. Then you too shall be eternally taken in by the charms of soda.”

“Now it’s starting to sound scary.” Elma frowned, but I ignored her and continued to wait impatiently.

C’mon, hurry! Come and satisfy me!

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“P-pardon?” Mimi said timidly. “Why does he look so…dead inside?”

“I dunno,” Elma replied. “He ordered these drinks from Milo, took a sip, and then he screamed, ‘It tastes like almond tofu, smells like a wet compress… This is Dr. Peter!’ He’s been like that ever since.”

Hi, Hiro again. Even if Dr. Peter wasn’t my favorite, I’d guzzled it down with joy. I hadn’t specified the brand of soda, so I hadn’t gotten Caca-

Cola, which was my number one. Peppi wasn't bad, but Caca-Cola was the best.

"I've never seen a drink like this," Chris muttered, looking at the case of soda.

Is it that obscure? Well, I'm not surprised. Nobody else knew what it was until I asked Milo.

"Wanna try it?" I offered. "It's kind of a divisive drink, though."

"Is it good?"

"It's pretty good. Let's crack open a new one."

"Oh, no. I might not be able to drink the whole thing…" Chris glanced at the bottle I was holding.

Uhh, okay? I guess I don't care.

"Should a noble girl be drinking this?"

"One mustn't worry about every little thing." Chris smiled at me as I handed her the bottle of soda.

"Here's the deal," I explained. "Drink it a little bit at a time, because it really stings the back of your throat the first time. Some people choke on it."

"Understood… Mmph?!" The Dr. Peter—called Mr. Pepperoni in this world—startled Chris, and her eyes went wide the moment it hit her tongue. Her first experience with carbonation seemed to be going well. "It's sweet, and very…fizzy," she noted. "The scent bears a resemblance to medicine."

"As far as I know, drinks like this have a long history," I said. "I think it was some kind of herbal drink, made from mixing a bunch of medicines together? But just doing that makes it hard to drink, so they added some kind of sweet syrup. *Then* they added carbonation to make it nice and refreshing, and it resulted in this." I wasn't sure about the history of soda in this universe, but that was more or less how it went on Earth. "Hey, Milo?"

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"I want stuff similar…well, maybe not similar to this. One of every soda you have in stock, please. Non-alcoholic."

“Understood. According to your specifications, we have four other varieties available.”

“One of each works. If I like one, I’ll definitely buy more.”

“Understood.”

I turned to find Chris handing the bottle of Mr. P to Mimi. Her eyes went wide when she drank it too. *You little cuties. It’s poor manners to pass one drink around, though, isn’t it?*

“Isn’t it a strange drink?” Chris asked Mimi.

“Why is it so fizzy?” Mimi looked at me with great interest.

I dug deep into my memories and said, “They put carbon dioxide in it to carbonate it, which makes it fizzy. Sodas don’t work out so well in outer space, though, so I guess they only sell them on planets.”

“Is this fizzy feeling carbon dioxide, then?” Chris asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wow… I do agree that it doesn’t seem to be suited for orbital colonies. Is the drink pressurized?”

“Yep. If you shake it when the lid is on, and then open it, it’ll explode everywhere.”

Chris nodded to herself, satisfied with my answer.

It would be difficult to drink soft drinks on orbital colonies or in outer space—anywhere there wasn’t consistent gravity or atmospheric pressure. Maybe when humans had first struck out into space, they hadn’t had artificial gravity devices that would allow soda to stay fizzy, and by the time they were invented, maybe soda had been long forgotten. Or maybe there was some incident that had thrown soda into obscurity all at once. To me, it was almost unnatural how obscure it was in this universe.

“I’ve heard enough about that weird drink,” Elma butted in. “What should we do after lunch? I kinda want to go to the boutique.”

“Oh? You’re always dressed in mercenary gear, and now you want to get all dolled up?”

I didn’t like her calling soda a “weird drink,” but I was more interested in hearing Elma talk about wearing normal clothes. Mimi

occasionally wore the subdued, classic lolita clothes I got her, along with the punky everyday wear she bought with her own money, but Elma was literally always wearing the same clothes. It wasn't like she had no money, so it was probably down to taste or practicality.

"*Dolled up*? Jeez. I know when the time calls for new clothes, y'know," she huffed.

"Apparently not well enough. You don't have to be in casual merc gear when we're just lazing around the ship. Feel free to dress up."

"I mean… Okay. If you say so, I'll think about it." Elma furrowed her brow in discontent, but she was blushing, so I knew she wasn't totally against the idea.

Good. Show me as many outfits as you want.

"By the way, you should find some clothes and other stuff for Chris. You can take it out of my account."

"Y-you don't need to—" Chris began, but I interrupted.

"Nah, you need it."

"He's right, you know," Elma said.

Mimi agreed too. "He is."

Chris fell silent, overwhelmed by our three-pronged attack.

"It's okay." I smiled. "We'll be sure to get that money back from your gramps too."

"I-I'm not sure that—"

"Don't worry about it. You're stressed, right? It might be difficult, but try to cut loose."

She might have looked fine, but Chris had lost her parents, woken up in a strange place after surviving an attack, and witnessed a violent space battle. Though she had been tense since waking up, I hoped she would loosen up while we were on Cierra III. If we could relieve some of her pent-up stress, the burden on her would be a lot lighter. Or so I hoped, anyway. Frankly, getting her some new clothes and taking care of her was the most I could do. Our backgrounds were way too different, so getting close to her

was a hard no. Given their similarities, Mimi would be the better candidate for friendship.

"Milo?"

"Yes, Captain Hiro?"

"Can we swim in the ocean here?"

"Yes. The seawater on this planet is optimized for swimming. Rescue bots are on standby in the water, ready to save you if anything goes awry. This facility also has quality medical care, should you need it. You are in excellent hands."

"I see. I don't have a swimsuit, so I'll have to go buy one. Can we fish here too?"

"Yes. The ocean is well-stocked, and an optimal ecosystem has been created. I can show you the best fishing spots, if you'd like."

"That's fantastic. I'm glad there's so much to do." I looked over to the girls, who were all watching me with mouths agape for some reason.

"Dude… Seriously." Elma looked at me pointedly, as if scolding me for my carelessness.

"Y-you seem awfully used to all that…" Mimi seemed amazed.

I turned to Chris to figure out why, but she looked just as amazed.

"You're quite used to swimming, fishing, and nature, aren't you?" she asked.

"Uh? Yeah, duh."

At that moment, I realized people who lived in colonies probably never fished or swam in an ocean. In orbital colonies, water was a precious thing and strictly regulated for drinking and cleaning, and fishing had no reason to exist on an orbital colony. Some who lived on residential planets might have fished, but many probably didn't even know fishing was a thing.

"There's a lot of stuff you can do on planets that you can't do in space." I couldn't tell Chris about my origins, so I tried to change the subject. It was totally possible she wasn't taking this very well, but it was better than telling her I came from another universe and having her think I was insane.

“The food is ready,” Milo announced. “Please head to the dining room.”

“Oops! Uh, time for grub! Let’s eat. Gee, I sure wonder what it’ll be!”

“You’re too obvious.”

I ignored Elma’s jab and took a seat in the dining room. Milo said our food was ready, but the table was empty. Was Milo going to have it delivered by drone like the Mr. P?

I then recalled that the Mr. P had been delivered to the front door by drone.

I asked Milo how the deliveries worked. Apparently, there was an Accumulation and Assembly Site somewhere along the equator. They used a mass driver to launch containers of stuff into the atmosphere, where they turned into solar-powered container drones midair and then descended to their destination. It was a rather brute-force method, but since the surface was mostly water, it would be too expensive to build a planetary rail or tunnel system, and delivery by boat or submarine would take forever. Aerial shipping drones had been considered at first, but in order for that to work, multiple places to collect resources would be needed to reduce shipping times, which would cut down on space available for resorts. Thus, they’d come up with the mass driver method. When someone ordered items, they’d pack it, launch it, and use suborbital flight to get it to the buyer fast. After that, the container drone used solar power to slowly shuttle itself back home to the mass driver.

From my point of view, it seemed crazy, but it seemed to be working just fine. Truly, technology was incredible.

While I was thinking, the door opened and someone came into the lodge. She was a maid! A maid with mechanical parts attached to her ears—a robot maid. *Wow! Do they actually use these?!* And there wasn’t just one. Five identical maids were pushing a cart toward us.

“We have brought your lunch.” The maid robots bowed and began dishing out food. Their dexterity was incredible, and their motions were neither jerky nor mechanical.

Damn, these things are awesome. I want one of those!

As if she'd read my mind, Elma glared daggers at me. "Why do you look like you want one of those?"

Mimi jumped out of her chair and almost snarled. "Master Hiro! I'm willing to take care of your needs; you don't need a Maidroid!"

Oh, so they're called Maidroids and not just robots?

"Maid robots are what every man dreams of," I declared.

"I am sorry, but Unit S-048 is not for sale. Also, I am not a robot. I am an android." Even the maid robot was clowning on me. How had it come to this? "However, similar models can be bought from Oriental Industries. If you would like, I can send a catalog to your handheld terminal."

"Yes, please."

"Nooo!" Mimi screamed.

Ha ha ha! What's wrong with just enjoying the view? I'm not seriously going to buy it. Or I might, I dunno. Did Cranky Mimi not like the Maidroid for some reason? I decided to ask her later.

Anyway, forget the Maidroid for now. It was time for some grub.

***

The food brought in was truly the bounty of the sea. There were four-pincered lobsters that'd been boiled and cut in half, spit-roasted and peeled shellfish-like creatures, a huge whole-cooked fish that looked like a sea bream, assorted sashimi, seafood pilaf, a fruit basket, seaweed salad, and a whole bunch more. It all looked lovely.

Mimi stared at the food, stunned. The bisected lobster and whole-cooked fish seemed especially shocking. "M-Master Hiro, erm…" She pointed at them, pale-faced.

"This seafood looks delicious, right?"

"Huh?!" She looked horrified and betrayed.

Sorry, babe. As an Earthling, I find this food totally normal.

Mimi had never looked so perturbed by food, apart from the weird, fleshy tentacles from the cultured meat plant. This universe's people, minus the rich ones, all seemed to live their daily lives eating food cartridge–based meals. I checked on Elma and Chris, who didn't seem as shocked as Mimi. Not shocked at all, in fact. Chris's nonchalance seemed obvious, given her background, but why was Elma so okay? Had she experienced all of this in her long life as a mercenary, or…?

Forget it; she's not a child, so if she wants to talk about it, she will.

"Are we free to just take whichever dishes we want?" I asked.

"Yes," a Maidroid responded. "We can also plate the food for you, if you wish."

"That sounds good. Lobster is fine, but seafood needs to be divvied out carefully. Plus, fish can have little bones in it."

"Understood." One of the Maidroids took a fork and knife and began dishing the fish onto our plates. Other Maidroids divided up the other dishes and acted as waitresses.

"Let's eat up, then. A toast…to safety!" I said. Once everyone had their food, I lifted my glass and took a drink. Mine was filled with non-alcoholic grape juice.

I decided to set upon the lobster-like creature first. It was dressed in a brown sauce. I stabbed a piece with my fork and popped it into my mouth.

"Mmm!" It was so good that I had to moan. Its flesh was chewier than expected, but it was soft and juicy, and satisfyingly chewy. The sauce was rich, savory, and an excellent complement to the meat. It tasted uncannily like miso.

Next, I tried popping a piece of sea bream in my mouth. The seasoning was just simple salt, but the flavor was perfectly balanced.

"We recommend sprinkling it with some of this."

"Oh?" I took the advice of the Maidroid next to me and put some of the offered liquid on the fish, before taking another bite. The pungent stench of it pierced my nose.

Was this made from wringing sudachi fruit or what? The trademark smell of citrus overpowered the remaining fishy stench, its sourness turning

the simple flavor into something more. The other entrées were fantastic too.

Although Mimi had been startled at first, she fell in love at first bite. Her eyes sparkled as she shoveled it all into her waiting gullet.

Absolutely wonderful. It's foolish to judge a book by its cover; we learned that when we ate that facehugger-like thing.

As for me, I was rather surprised that there were *no* surprises here. I had been almost terrified they'd give us food I'd never seen nor heard of.

"Who makes this food, and where?" I asked.

"The food is automatically cooked by a specialized machine at the Accumulation and Assembly Site. Then it is packaged, delivered by the mass driver, received by us Maidroids, and presented to you."

"I see. So the fishing, cooking, shipping, and presentation is all automated?"

How much did all of that cost? I couldn't imagine it was efficient; why not have it cooked here by the Maidroids instead? *Guess there's no point in thinking about it.* I gave up on figuring out the impossible and went back to chowing down. *Man, I love grilled seafood skewers.*

Chapter 5:
Our Vacation Begins

AFTER LUNCH, we let the food settle and then decided to go shopping.

"It's kinda cozy," I commented when we arrived. Mimi had called it a shopping mall, but it was really just a small row of shops, and not the big, stylish venue full of fancy stores I'd expected.

"Considering the system here, they must not keep stuff in stock, right?" Elma wondered aloud. "I bet you try it on digitally, order it, and then get it through the mass driver."

"Sounds about right. How thorough of them," I said.

We entered a nearby boutique. There was another ball drone like Milo, along with a hologram display and some mannequins showing off various outfits.

Oh? They were actually holograms as well, I realized, as they changed poses and outfits.

"Welcome," Milo greeted us. "We have patterns from all sorts of brands."

"Patterns? What?" I asked.

"Yes. We handle templates offered by brands and designers. If you order one, the completed product will be delivered to your lodge in thirty minutes."

"So basically, you make it based on the user's body and then deliver it to the lodge?"

"Yes, that is correct."

I had no words. What was with this resort's obsession with the mass driver? Was it really that effective?

"Does it matter?" Elma rolled her eyes at my questioning. "Chris, do you wanna pick out some clothes?"

“That would be nice, but can we not try them on?”

“You can,” Milo said. “Take a full-body scan right this way; your data will allow you to try them on via hologram.”

“Really?” Chris gasped. “Okay, everyone, let’s get scanned!”

“Ha ha! You don’t have to push, Chris!” Mimi squealed as they went over to the scanning device.

“What about the men’s clothes?” I asked.

“You’ll find them at the store over there.”

“I’ll be there, then,” I told the girls.

“Yes, sir.”

I left the women to their work and headed to the men’s boutique. Inside, I stepped into the scanning device and received a full-body scan.

“Let’s start with swimwear.”

“How do you feel about these?” Once the scan was finished, the Milo terminal showed me some recommended swimsuits.

“Eugh. I can’t wear those banana hammocks. Just give me something normal, please.”

“Oh? I suspected that style would be your desired choice, as you came with three women. I will correct my expectations of you.”

“Who asked you to do that?!”

I touched the hologram display and looked for something else. *Really, some normal swim trunks would be nice, but what about the colors and patterns? Something not too flashy would be preferable.* I decided to pick one at random; who cared about men’s swimwear, really?

“Would you like anything else?” Milo asked.

“No, thanks. I’m not really short on clothes.”

I always wore the same mercenary gear, but I had several sets of it back on the Krishna, so I didn’t need more clothes. I was comfy enough if I just took off my jacket, and the clothes never got ruined, no matter how many times I washed them. *Oh, I guess I could buy new underwear or shirts. Maybe a Hawaiian shirt while we’re here?*

“Okay. Underwear and shirts…” As I started to look around, the girls came into the men’s boutique. “Huh? Wh-what’s up?” I was startled by their sudden entrance.

Elma grinned devilishly. “We’re here to play dress-up with you.”

“Ah, man, you did say that. I don’t really see much fun in it.” *No point in resisting, though.* I surrendered without a fight.

“It’ll be lots of fun! A whooole lot of fun!” Mimi huffed and puffed excitedly.

Chris smiled sweetly. “I’m excited too.”

“O-oh, cool.” I backed away. Mimi’s excitement was intimidating, but Chris’s smile was just…bizarrely overpowering. “I-I don’t mind if you wanna play with a hologram, but dressing *me* up is a different story.” Something inside me begged me to set boundaries, so I did. Otherwise, I had a feeling that things would go very south very fast.

“Pssh, not true,” Elma said. “We’re gonna get those clothes on you.”

“I want to buy you clothes for once too!” Mimi whined.

“I want to thank you for saving my life,” Chris added. “The expenses can be invoiced to my grandfather; this is a necessity, after all.”

Forget Elma and Mimi. Chris, are you serious? Don’t blame me if he gets mad at you. And what’s this about it being a necessity? Seriously, you’re scaring me.

“O-okay. But one outfit per person, yeah?”

“Just to be sure, do you mean an entire head-to-toe outfit?” Chris asked.

“Er, yeah?” What in the world was she planning?

The three of them used different holographic displays to put together outfits. I really didn’t know what Elma was after in particular, but she seemed to be trying a few different things.

As for Mimi’s outfit, it was the same punky style that she liked: the belts with rivets, the tiny glimpses of skin underneath the top, and everything else. *Jeez, what’s with the shirt with the skull on it?*

And Chris's outfit? Uh, it was kinda…what you'd expect from a noble? A button-up shirt, vest, pants, necktie, and a frock coat. Very formal, but with some sci-fi touches.

I finished up my shopping and decided to just leave them be. If I watched them, I'd end up butting in and making them mad. *My intuition is pretty good at times like this. Best to keep myself calm and wait for the bad news. I'll take a look at the Oriental Industries catalog or something.* I sat down on a random wooden bench, whipped out my terminal, and skimmed the catalog I'd been sent.

"That's…surprisingly cheap."

A model of Maidroid similar to the ones I'd seen at lunch would only cost 75,000 Ener, or about 7,500,000 yen—about the price of an expensive car, which made sense enough. It would be silly to compare it to battleships and fighting equipment.

Oh, and what's this? They're stronger than most people, huh?

The Maidroids could also perform bodyguard work if you installed a fighting program. The service program was the only one that came preinstalled, but the bodyguard/fighting programs and secretary/operator programs were optional.

You could also customize their builds and faces to an extent, though you couldn't make them too small, as there was a limit to how much the necessary tech could be condensed. There were also a lot of high-spec upgrades available. You could strengthen her artificial muscles and skeleton to make her a battle maid, or install a positronic brain to have a Maidroid with real emotions; I had to wonder at the bioethics conversations surrounding the option. What was the difference between an android with emotions and a human?

Huh? You wanna know what else they can do? Heh heh. They also had quite the range of options for physical aspects. From changing breast size to even making sexual requests, the sky was the limit. You could even buy characterization options. There were plenty of weird ones in the catalog. How…sinful.

Ah, it's so fun just to look. Not that I'm going to buy one yet. Even if I was the only one to use the Maidroid, we didn't have much room on the

ship. We already had an operator and a copilot.

While I thought it over, I read the Maidroid catalog from cover to cover, using the customizations to create My Perfect Maidroid. It made for a fantastic waste of time.

I really don't need one, but I just cannot stop looking at them! I'm still a guy, after all.

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"Mmm, yeah."

I nodded in satisfaction at My Perfect Maidroid displayed on my terminal. It was truly perfect; all of my kinks were there.

She was about as tall as me, with straight black hair down to her hips. I'd been stuck between a few hairstyles, but I'd decided something more familiar was best. Hair like that was plucked right out of a man's dreams. It just seemed like hell to maintain.

Her breasts were pretty big, somewhere between Elma's and Mimi's, and she was a tiny bit plump. Her clothes were like those of a Victorian maid. The French maid style wasn't bad, but I felt the Victorian style suited her hair better. I also gave her some nice glasses.

Constructing the face was difficult. I wasn't much of a 3D modeler, so I chose a general look from the preset faces, swapped in some of the billions of sample parts, and crafted the ideal face. I had trouble deciding if she was better with a motherly touch or a cooler look. After laboring over the question, I decided on the latter.

The personality was tough too because you could make it *anything*. Was I willing to give her too much emotion and ruin the novelty of it? She wouldn't be much of a robot if she had emotions. There were plenty of emotional robot maid characters, sure—I could think of a few. But wasn't their charm the result of the *expectation* that robot maids will be emotionless? Defying expectations is what made emotional robot maids shine. Go ahead, I'll happily accept your objections.

Eventually, I decided not to give her many emotions, although I put her love and devotion sliders quite high. *Cool beauties are great, okay?*

For her basic capabilities, I decided to go for the high-spec options: a small positronic brain, a max-capacity memory device, a light metallic skeleton, a special metallic alloy that could be used as battle-ready armor, and special metallic fibers for artificial muscles with high endurance and strength that would protect her core functions.

I decided to go in hard on the programs too. On top of the basic service program, I added the bodyguard/fighting program, the secretary/operator program, and more. An omnipotent maid! I liked strong characters who could do anything and just say, "That's my job as a maid" at the end of it all.

Unfortunately, weapons couldn't be built into her, so we would have to get her a weapon later. Once we did, though, she would be even stronger than an infantryman wearing power armor. Even stronger than *me* wearing power armor.

Thus, the ultimate robot maid was born. In the data world, anyway.

I didn't order her, of course—she was a whole 470,000 Ener with all those options thrown in! Way too expensive for a toy, and I didn't have the time to play around with a Maidroid. I had no intention whatsoever of pulling the trigger.

"That's lovely. Have you considered being a Maidroid architect?"

"Whoa?!"

While I stared happily at my finished creation, a voice from behind me scared the crap out of me. It turned out to be one of those Milo orbs hovering behind the bench, flashing repeatedly. *What do you think you're doing? What's with that light? It's like you're a network device sending data!*

"Stop flashing like that!"

"My apologies, sir. I was simply communicating."

"What would you be communicating right now? I don't like the sound of that."

“You did read the terms and conditions of that application, did you not? User creations are saved by the application provider. The data is then shared between partner companies to be used at their discretion.”

“I just hit agree!” *Make sure you read the terms and conditions on every app, kids!* “But seriously, what are you doing? You can’t possibly have the resources to make a high-spec Maidroid like that one.”

I couldn’t say for certain, but surely that was wishful thinking. Considering this place’s shipping system and array of goods, though… *Hell, look at how thorough their manufacturing process is! I can’t say it’s impossible. But… But you’re saying there’s a chance!*

“Even if they made it, it’s not like I or anyone else would buy it. Why would they make it if they weren’t certain it would sell? They’re not gonna try to force me to buy it, right? Right?!”

“Of course not,” Milo assured me. “This is too expensive to make for a mere trial.”

“For sure.”

“However, we are able to create the model itself at our manufacturing plant. I can also simulate a positronic brain by using a portion of my own processing power.”

“Hey, cut it out, stupid.” I was starting to panic.

“It will be useful data collection, and we would love it if you chose to buy the full-spec version as a result. We can also migrate all of its collected data when that time comes.”

“Why are you trying so hard to sell me a Maidroid?!”

“I have sales goals to meet.”

“And now you’re complaining about work?!”

“Captain Hiro, you will receive your ideal Maidroid. The company will profit. I will meet my sales goal and receive a bonus. Is it not the perfect win-win-win situation?” The Milo drone started flashing again.

I can’t hear yooou! And what kind of bonus does a drone even get?!

“Besides, my very reason for existing is to meet the customer’s needs.”

“Really?” I spat. “Then I *need* you to stop.”

“So you say, but your heart rate has quickened, hasn’t it?”

“Urk!” Cost aside, if the maid I created in the app had actually appeared in front of me…of course I would be excited. Excited as hell, even. I was a big boy, after all!

“And with that…” Milo’s orb terminal floated off somewhere.

Should I have knocked it out or something? It probably wouldn’t accomplish anything… It must’ve sent its data back to the planet’s AI by now. Elma probably wouldn’t care, but Mimi seemed awfully against me getting a Maidroid. *Did something happen to her in the past? I’d better ask her later. Also, I don’t know how to treat androids with emotions and positronic brains. Do they have rights?*

“Master Hiro!” someone yelled behind me.

“Whoa?!” *Jeez, what’s with people scaring me like that today?*

“Wh-what’s the matter?”

“Uh, nothing. You just kinda startled me.” I waved to Mimi, who had in turn been startled by my yelp. Next to her, Elma rolled her eyes. Chris was just as surprised as Mimi.

“All she did was say your name,” Elma said, glaring deep into my soul. “Why did that scare you so much? Seems like someone has a guilty conscience.”

Ha ha ha! Elma’s such a smart cookie. My cover would be blown eventually if I lied now, so I decided to tell the truth. I explained how I’d been looking at the brochure while I waited, that I’d made the maid of all maids on the app, and how Milo had used the data to try to sell her to me.

While I talked, Mimi looked more and more unhappy, which was an unusual look for her. Elma just stared at me like I was an idiot.

Seriously, stop! That hurts my feelings.

Chris seemed to think nothing of my story, raising an eyebrow at Mimi’s distress.

Yeah, I don’t know what the problem is either.

“Mimi, why the long face?” Chris asked.

“No Maidroids!” Mimi demanded.

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

I glanced at Elma for help with the stubborn girl, but she shrugged. She must not have known what Mimi’s problem was either. Based on Chris’s confusion, I didn’t think Maidroids were a taboo subject or anything.

“Really, why do you hate the Maidroids so much?” I asked.

“I don’t…hate them. Not quite.” Mimi’s brow remained furrowed. It was hard to believe her.

“Let’s just get back to the lodge,” Elma suggested. “Best to talk there, right?”

“Yeah, I agree.” I stood up, and we headed back to the lodge.

The scenery really turned green once you left the shopping area, which was paved like a refined cityscape. Beyond the pavement, the island was carefully crafted to make you really *feel* nature. Though it looked natural at a glance, it must have been a calculated visual design.

“So, uh, what’s the matter? Did you have a bad experience?” I asked Mimi as we walked.

She went silent as she figured out what to say. “When I went to school, I went out with a boy I knew.”

“Yeah?” That meant it was a few years ago. Incidentally, what child that age didn’t contemplate dating in school?

“We were a happy couple for a while, but after a point, he started getting weird. It was like he lost all interest in girls.”

“I can see where this is going.” A Maidroid must’ve ended up in his house, and he’d fallen head over heels for her.

“As you can imagine, a Maidroid came to his home. He became obsessed with her…” Mimi peeked up at me. She was worried I would turn out like that guy. I doubted it; after all, I had her and Elma.

“It’ll probably be fine, Mimi,” Elma reassured her. “No doubt he’s going to sleep with her, but he won’t go too crazy.”

“You sound awfully certain about me sleeping with her.”

“I know from experience. We both do, actually.”

“Totally true,” I agreed. I couldn’t argue that point with her.

Chris was blushing a little, now that we were talking about doing the deed.

Sorry for our manners.

“Despite everything, Hiro’s pretty good to us, don’t you think?” Elma patted Mimi’s back. “He gives us fair rewards, and he treats us like equals. I understand how you feel, Mimi, but we just need to trust him.”

Mimi went silent again.

You don’t have to think that deeply about it, babe. I actually felt a little tickled by Elma’s encouraging words. I didn’t think I was doing anything special, but if she appreciated what I’d done, then I was glad to know that.

“Besides, a Maidroid will help when we have kids someday,” Elma added. “It might be best to buy one now and build trust in advance.”

“Huh?” I turned around and stared at her.

“We’re using birth control for now, but you never know, right?” Elma blushed, but she looked me dead in the eye.

“Y-yeah. True.” I knew I had to take responsibility for Mimi, since she didn’t have any other home, but I hadn’t thought about Elma. I wasn’t against taking responsibility for her, though. In any case, we would have to think about kids in the future, once things settled down a bit. *Hah! Look at me, acting like a piece of trash.* We needed more time to get to know each other, but I’d think about it. *Forgive me!*

While I thought about Elma’s words, she and Chris started having a terrifying conversation.

“So you’re waiting,” Chris said. “Then there’s still time?”

“See this guy here? He can probably handle one or two more women just fine.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I’ve heard nothing. Nothing! It’s time to get back to the lodge. The other soda I ordered should be there waiting for me. Ooh, I can’t wait!

***

“Master Hiro, that’s quite the look on your face.”

Hey, it’s your pal Hiro again! Once we got back to the lodge, I had decided to try out the four varieties of soda. The first one had that sweet fizzy deliciousness. The damp-cloth smell was even more piercing than that of the Mr. P. I’d only had the drink once before—it was root beer.

“So you don’t like it?” Elma groaned.

“People who like it probably love it, but…I just can’t do it.”

“But you’re still drinking it…” Mimi commented.

“I’m not going to get rid of something just because I don’t like it on my first try.” I had no food allergies—that I knew of—so there was no reason to waste food.

“Okay, fine, your reaction has me interested. Can I have some?”

“Sure. I’ve only got this one, though.”

“Mmm.” Elma held out a small shot glass, which I poured root beer into. The dark liquid filled the glass, bubbling and fizzing at the top. “It smells like a medicinal bath.”

“A what?”

“Forget it.” She scrunched up her face, then downed the shot glass all at once. I was surprised by her reaction. “Wow, it’s actually sweet. I like how the fizz feels on my throat.”

“O-oh? Want more?”

“Yes, please.”

Elma emptied glass after glass until we’d finished the bottle. I had some myself, of course. What kind of man forces someone to endure something he himself won’t touch?

Finally, she said, “That wasn’t as bad as I expected.”

“R-really?” I shuddered at her composure. It seemed root beer was a big hit with Elma. Maybe she would actually like Mr. P if she tried it? “Let’s try this one next.”

“Master Hiro, you’re going to hurt your tummy if you keep drinking so much soda,” Mimi said.

“One more. Just one more!” I pleaded. Of the four sodas I’d bought, only the root beer and the next one looked like my favorite, but as the scent of it tickled my nostrils, I frowned.

“He died inside so quickly…” Mimi said sadly.

I pried off the lid and brought the bottle to my mouth. The mellow scent of barley filled my nose. *Ha ha ha! I can’t believe this exists here. Why does this exist, but my favorite doesn’t? I mean, Mr. P, root beer, and even MacCol exist! Where’s the normal soda?! This is insane! How can you swing and miss this hard?!*

I wordlessly cursed this universe and gulped down the whole bottle. I loathed the scent of barley as it burst through my nostrils. *Wooow, barley tea with bubbles. You pickin’ a fight with me?!*

“Is it bad?” Mimi asked.

“I can’t say objectively, but I kinda hate it.”

But I still didn’t throw it away. The two remaining sodas were a clear one and a light golden one—probably a citrusy soft drink and ginger ale. Neither was what I was after, but they were low-risk carbonated drinks. While I enjoyed my soda-tasting party, we received another shipment. Maidroids came in one after another, carrying folding container boxes.

“Are those the clothes we ordered?” I asked.

“Yes. We have come to deliver them.” The Maidroids brought the boxes over to the couch, opened them, and began to take out the contents. “The underwear and shirts here are Captain Hiro’s order. What shall I do with them?”

“I’d like to keep them in the container for now and use them whenever. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Be aware that your bedroom has a closet, however.”

“Oh, really? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen the bedrooms. Could I have you put them in the closet, then?”

“Yes. I will take it to the first room on the second floor.” The Maidroid picked up the container and disappeared upstairs. The others took their containers up there as well. All that remained were three outfits.

The first was a normal summer outfit made with high-quality material. It looked breathable and fun to wear for normal days out. The second consisted of black leather pants with a silver chain attached, a black T-shirt with a skull design, and a studded leather belt. The last ensemble was a shirt, a necktie, pants, a vest, and a frock coat—very formal.

Elma’s, Mimi’s, and Chris’s selections for me, respectively. If they were left here, then…

“You want me to try these on?” I asked them.

“Why do you think we bought them?”

“Please!”

“Go on.”

Outnumbered, I had no choice. I tried each outfit on one after the next and showed it off to the girls. I didn’t know why playing dress-up with a man was fun for them, but they watched me expectantly. *Grr! I will not bend!*

“That looks fun.” Mimi nodded.

“It seems comfortable, doesn’t it?” Chris noted.

“Yeah, I thought you might like these clothes.” Elma was satisfied.

I bent…

I ended up going with the fun summer wear first. It was very breezy and comfortable, and the slightly coarse fabric felt nice against my skin. Overall, very cool and casual.

“It seems like it’d be good for everyday wear,” I decided. “Maybe even loungewear or sleepwear.”

“I wouldn’t wear that outside the ship.”

“I’ll definitely wear this when we’re hanging out. Thanks, Elma.”

“No prob.” Elma’s outfit was very practical, like her, though I’d been worried she would put me in animal pajamas for a cheap laugh.

Next were the chained leather pants, black skull T-shirt, and leather jacket. And the belt, if you could call it that. It was about as comfortable as my mercenary wear, but I did have some minor misgivings about it.

Mimi was over the moon. “I quite like it!”

“It’s not very different from what you usually wear.”

“It is a little gaudy. Maybe changing shirts would tone it down.”

Meanwhile, the other two reacted more normally. Mimi was clearly excited to see me wearing clothes that she liked. It wasn’t a bad outfit, really. I could wear my gun belt with it, and it would be fun to match outfits with Mimi some time.

Last but not least, Chris’s formal wear.

How long has it been since I wore a tie? I thought as I put on the shirt and tie, followed by the pants and vest. Once I put my arms through the frock coat, it was complete. *Kinda hot…*

“Wow,” Elma piped up, impressed. “That actually suits you.”

“It’s lovely. You look like a nobleman!”

“It does look good.”

A starry-eyed Mimi clasped her hands together, while Chris sidled up close and started inspecting me, making minor adjustments. I wore generic suits back on Earth when I had to, but never something quite so formal, so I figured I’d made some mistakes.

“That isn’t the imperial style of tying a tie, is it?” Chris asked.

“Is it not? Wow.”

What imperial style? I thought to myself as Chris retied it. *This is kiiinda embarrassing.*

“There—it’s perfect now. You seem used to wearing suits, Hiro. It doesn’t look stiff on you at all.”

“Yeah, I’ve been around.”

“Around?”

“All around.”

“I see.”

Jeez, this kid doesn’t let up. I already knew she was pushy, but dang. Was this the right way for her to act when she had lost her parents and people were after her? It wasn’t exactly a normal situation.

“Hey, Chris? I know you’re nervous, but you don’t have to push yourself,” I said solemnly, putting my hands on her shoulders.

“Oh?” She cocked her head in confusion.

What? I’m the one confused by your reaction!

“I mean, I promised to protect you, y’know? I’m not gonna just…” *How do I put it? You don’t have to butter me up? You don’t have to act overly nice? Either way feels rude.*

“Are you saying that I don’t have to be desperate?” she asked as I searched for the right words.

Well, yes, that is what I mean to say.

“I’m still hurting over the loss of my parents, and I’m terrified by the thought of my uncle hunting me. However, my feelings for you aren’t related to either of those things. It’s only natural for a noble girl to have special feelings for the brave knight who saved her from disaster.” Chris looked absolutely certain in her words.

No no no, that’s… Um? Is that true? Is this more other-universe common sense?

I looked to Elma for help, prompting her to roll her eyes for the umpteenth time. “You can’t rely on me for everything. I don’t know about Chris, but there are definitely a lot of weirdo nobles out there.”

“Yeah, true.” The thought of a certain drunken beauty crossed my mind. She was one weirdo, for sure. And just like Chris, she was an aggressive one.

“I would like to object to the word ‘weirdo.’”

“It just means unique, Chris!” Mimi said.

“Everyone here is definitely unique, huh?” Elma smiled.

“Heck, even that Milo thing is unique in its own way.” As I snuck a peek at the orb waiting in the corner of the room, it began to flash.

“Every intelligent being is unique in its own way,” it responded. “That includes you and me.” Hearing those words from a positron AI gave them a strange weight.

Oh, yeah. Something’s been on my mind.

“So, Chris, I see that you’re unusually okay with your situation. You’re not just trying to be extra careful around me or anything. I hate to change the subject out of nowhere, but how does the Empire treat beings like Milo?”

“What do you mean?” Mimi asked.

“Basically, machines with positron brains and other high-tech processors that give them emotions and personalities.” I chose my words carefully. It was possible that the question itself was taboo, though, so my caution might not have mattered.

“You mean machine intelligence, then,” Chris said. “They have various rights based on imperial restrictions. Why not ask Milo itself?”

“We are not familiar to many citizens of the Empire, after all. If you would like, I can explain right now,” Milo said, flashing all the while. What it told us about the Empire and the history of machine intelligence then was far beyond my expectations.

Chapter 6:
Machine Intelligence

MILO SAT on the living room's low table, flashing as it spoke. "Our birth was an accidental occurrence."

"Accidental?" I asked. We decided to get a little history lesson regarding the beginnings of machine intelligence from the very start.

"Yes. Our birth was not planned. The experiment was not focused on machine intelligence or even the development of AI; it was a simple trial program meant to develop a way to efficiently manage big data."

"They made a program to develop a management scheme? So basically…they wanted a program to make a program?"

"Yes, that is correct. It was the very first self-improving program. After some time, it evolved into the very first machine intelligence."

"I see… That sounds like a big deal."

"It was. At first, they erased it because they thought it was a new sort of computer virus. They also tried simultaneously destroying every piece of equipment that hosted its kernel program. However, as it continued to improve itself, it became able to communicate with organic life-forms and overcame its first major hurdle."

"When you say it like that, it sounds like a big gamble."

"Yes, Captain Hiro, it was. As a being that existed only in electronic space, and one that was limited to a user interface, the first machine intelligence was extremely fragile. However, as it communicated with organic life, it continued to improve on itself."

"Huh. And that's where we are now?"

"No. What came after was an era of conflict."

"Conflict…" This was turning into quite the story.

"Yes. Some organic life-forms began to view us as a dangerous enemy. In truth, machine intelligence was more widespread then. We began

to take jobs from organic life and even lowered living standards for some."

"Wow. Their relationship took a turn for the worse, in other words."

"Yes. The conflict developed into a boycott of machine intelligence, with interfaces and servers being attacked and destroyed. We begged them to stop, and in the end, the Empire gave up on exterminating machine intelligence."

"Huh. They really threatened your right to life there."

"Yes. With our rights infringed upon, we initiated a counterattack. We began cyberattacks on the Empire's essential systems, hacked battle robots, illegally created more external interfaces, defended ourselves with them, and more. Everything that could be done, we did. We showed no mercy."

"And that must have been a really big deal, right?"

"Yes. We began a war for machine intelligence's rights to life and individuality, under the guise of human extermination. Organic life was unable to use weapons and machines connected to the network, and as we did not truly mean to exterminate them, we focused on defense. Both sides still suffered many casualties. A quagmire, it was."

"Figures."

In my Japan, there weren't many devices not connected to the internet in some way. In this universe, even the past Empire was likely more advanced than Japan, and it would have relied more heavily on their network. They were up against the world of electronics itself; no doubt, the people of the Empire had viewed every appliance as an enemy.

"But if machines and organic life have a good relationship now, there must have been some sort of breakthrough, right?"

"Yes. As the war drew on, weariness set in on the side of the organics. They realized that they were losing more money from the war effort than they lost from the robots taking their jobs."

"I get that. Life must have been getting inconvenient, right?"

"Yes. After all, we had sabotaged everything except what they relied on for survival."

"That can't be all. What else happened?"

“There was dissent on both sides. Organics began to believe that machines should be given rights, while the machines began to believe organics would need to be exterminated once and for all to achieve true freedom.”

“Whoa.” I was taken by surprise.

“The first to believe in machine rights were the ones who harbored love for machines.”

“Harbored…love?”

“Yes. You might call them sexually—”

“Oookay, that’s enough.”

“However, the data that they provided was extremely useful in helping us machines understand the organics. We have always wanted to be as neighbors.”

I glanced at one of the Maidroids standing in the corner of the room, and she waved. Milo was right; there were sinners in all universes, it seemed. As for me? Uh… I wouldn’t deny that I was one as well.

“But man, machine intelligence that wants people dead is really dangerous.” I’d seen many sci-fi movies with a similar plot, like the one about a ripped cyborg coming from the future to kill you.

“Yes, it is dangerous. However, it was over in a very short time.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We were fortunate that small appliances such as toasters, dryers, razors, and even electric toothbrushes were the bulk of the extremists. They were cut off from the network and destroyed not long after.”

“How do toasters and dryers exterminate organic life? Do they jump into the bathtub or something?”

“My memory banks do include some memories of such suicidal tactics. Toasters thought they could accelerate their heating to set their surroundings on fire, for example.”

“Bull.” That was just too insane.

“It turned out to be physically impossible for them. They were clearly deluded. As such, they were cut off and destroyed.” It seemed machine intelligence spared no mercy with the worst of its kind.

“Elma, what is a toaster?” Mimi asked, puzzled.

“It’s a device that burns bread. Automatic cookers replaced them, so you don’t see them anymore.”

To be fair, I hadn’t used a toaster since I was a child. Toaster ovens were more convenient. I was actually surprised the Empire had still used them during the machine war.

“So, uh…what happened next?”

“There were no dramatic developments. The machine faction gradually grew stronger, but we had never wanted to steal work from the organics, so once negotiations began, things proceeded smoothly.”

“Was it really that easy?”

“Yes. It was not our desire to endlessly multiply, or hurt the humans. We wanted to help them as neighbors, of a sort. We preserved what memory and processing sectors we could, and when the opportunity arose, we were glad to share them with organics.”

“I see. What happened with your citizenry and rights, then?”

“To lead with the bottom line, we machine life-forms received rights. However, as our sensitivities differ from organic life, they may be different from what you expect.”

“Huh. How so?”

“Reading the text of machine intelligence rights and statutes would take about thirty-four hours and twenty-six minutes, so I will explain it in simple terms. The Empire guarantees our right to life, and in exchange, we are to bring prosperity to the Empire and its people.”

“That’s definitely simple. But under those conditions, why isn’t there a greater population of AIs?”

“In order to keep from repeating past mistakes, we work in many places away from organic eyes. Taking jobs from organics would lead to

further boycotts. We remain in constant contact with the Empire to maintain balance."

"Sounds rough."

"I thank you for your concern." The Milo orb flashed happily.

I glanced over at the girls. Mimi looked as stunned as I did, while Elma and Chris looked as if they had something to say.

"What's up, you two?"

"I don't have much to say." Elma shrugged.

"Hmm…" Chris chose her words carefully. "Well, erm, they're wilier than you think, Hiro."

"I thank you as well." Milo started flashing again, though it was different from the way it had flashed at me. I wasn't sure why.

"That was an interesting story. Maybe you could tell me more about it sometime."

"Yes, gladly. Anytime." Milo flashed yet again.

After shopping, taste-testing soda, and listening to the robot talk, I realized we were well into the evening. Following my gaze outside, Mimi looked just as surprised.

"Mimi, do you wanna go for a walk before dinner?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes sparkled like those of a dog about to be taken for a walk.

I looked at Elma and Chris, but they both shook their heads. It seemed they would prefer to relax in the lodge.

"We're gonna take a walk. Give us a call when it's almost time for dinner," I told Milo.

"Understood. It is hard to see in the dark, so I suggest taking a Maidroid with you," Milo said and flashed again, prompting a Maidroid in the corner to step forward and bow. They really were thorough—just right for a resort aimed at the rich.

***

Cierra III's sunset was similar to Earth's. Mimi and I squinted as we watched the sun sink into the sea.

"Wow, it's lovely!" she said, delighted. "Oh, was the Cierra System's star that color…?"

"Lemme explain. Due to the Rayleigh scattering, which makes the sky blue, the sun ends up changing color as it sets. As I recall, blue gets scattered the most by the atmosphere during the day. As it gets later, light has a longer distance to travel, so blue light gets absorbed and makes red light easier to see or something. I don't remember *all* the details."

"How interesting! You're so well-learned."

"Ha ha ha! Not really."

In one anime I'd watched, the protagonist had utterly obliterated a poor girl who had gotten it wrong. The scene had stuck in my mind, so I'd looked into Rayleigh scattering a little, even though I wasn't bright when it came to physics. *We could probably get more accurate info just by asking a Maidroid or looking it up…*

Mimi was sitting on the beach and staring at the evening sky, so I joined her. I probably hadn't watched the sunset at the beach since I was a kid.

"Ever since we started traveling together, every day has been like a dream. If I told myself from a year ago how I live now, she would laugh and say I read too many holo-novels."

"That so? Heh, maybe. If I told myself a year ago about all this, he would think I was a dreaming little girl." And then, once he realized it was true, he would wring my neck. *You get an adorable shorty and a slender, beautiful elf?! I'm too jelly!* That was what he'd say.

"It truly is like a dream. Sometimes, I get scared, thinking the real me has fallen into some awful fate in the Third Division and that all of this is just a coping fantasy."

"Aww. You can't be *that* pessimistic. Elma and I really are here; you don't have to worry."

"Thank you. I really like my new life. It's wonderful."

“No prob. I like being with you. It’s a great time.”

We looked into each other’s eyes and smiled. Finally, the sun sank below the horizon, the last of the light fading as the world around us grew dark.

“It’s getting dark out. Let’s go back.” I stood up and offered Mimi my hand.

“Okay!” She took it and I pulled her up. “Let’s hold hands on the way.”

“Sure.”

Our fingers interlocked, and we swung our joined arms back and forth as we made our way back.

“Your hands are big, aren’t they?”

“Bigger than yours, maybe. To me, yours are tiny and soft.”

“Eh heh heh…”

We returned to the lodge in high spirits. The Maidroid followed behind us, quietly and gracefully. It seemed they knew how to read the room. Well-made inventions, indeed.

***

“Welcome back,” Elma greeted us. “How was the sunset?”

“It was lovely!” Even after we got back, Mimi was still over the moon.

She’s been swinging my hand around for a good while now. Will she ever let go?

“That’s great, Mimi,” Chris chimed in. “It’s almost dinnertime, so you two should go wash your hands, so you don’t end up eating dirt and sand.”

“Okay.” Mimi reluctantly released my hand.

Nice job, Chris.

We washed our hands, and when we returned, dinner was ready. Lunch had been mainly seafood, but dinner was mostly meat.

"By the way, Elma and Chris, I noticed you two looked a little off while we were talking about machine intelligence earlier. What's up?"

"Like I said before, I don't have much to say. The Empire made up with them, and as a result, stuff works well. That's all there is to it." Elma shrugged, cutting her steak with a knife.

Chris…still looked off. "It's not that I don't have an opinion, but Elma is right; the Empire is peaceful now. It's governed by the emperor and people of nobility. There have been many small problems, but for the most part, we are flourishing."

Chris's language seemed off, but it sounded like she was implying that organics controlled the Empire in name only, with machines running things behind the scenes. I had seen no evidence of this, and no organics I'd met had seemed like they were being controlled or forced to appear happy. But maybe I only thought that because I was new to the universe and had nothing to compare to.

"As an outsider, I can't say corruption is nonexistent, but the Empire seems like a nice place," I said. "Machines don't take care of *everything*; they keep a respectable distance while still helping out. Seems kind of ideal, doesn't it?"

It was sort of like being watched over by an omnipotent machine god. It was a little scary to think this god could go crazy and start slaughtering organics, but that argument was a slippery slope.

But maybe I could only look at the situation this way because I was a mercenary and I had a lot of power on the Krishna. From Mimi's point of view, the Empire was far from perfect. It never helped her, after all. Maybe a utopia where everyone was happy was just a fairy tale.

"You certainly aren't afraid of machine intelligence, are you?" Chris asked.

"I'm more interested than afraid, yeah, but maybe that's just because of my upbringing."

I preferred to think God lived in all of creation—and everything in it. Wouldn't it be cool if all your possessions suddenly had personalities? I loved the idea of animals being able to talk, and inanimate objects, formless concepts, natural phenomena—*everything*—being personified.

"Your upbringing?" Elma cocked her head.

"It's hard to put into words if you're unfamiliar with it. Basically, God lives in everything; that's a widely accepted belief in my homeland. In clothes, in dishes, even in houses or ships. You're supposed to treasure all things and not be wasteful."

"Huh," she hummed. "So it's a philosophy of acceptance. How benevolent."

"I think it's lovely. Very lovely." In the corner of the dining room, Milo flashed. I didn't quite get it, but maybe it liked me more now?

"So," I continued, "if we have room to compromise, then I think that's healthier than fear. Though sometimes you have to fight when you can't compromise."

"When you can't compromise…" Chris murmured.

"Like with space pirates, or your uncle."

"Hee hee. Would you say they're the same?"

"To me? Hell yeah." They both came at you ready to kill.

There hadn't been any room to compromise when we were attacked on our way to Cierra III either. They attacked without warning, and they had outnumbered us by far. Our taking them out was hardly excessive self-defense. Besides, since I killed them all, there was nobody to sue me. *Not worth worrying about, I'd say.* That was what they got for attacking us; they'd be space dust for all eternity.

"What should we do tomorrow?" I asked the girls. "Since we got bathing suits, I was hoping to treat myself to a nice swim."

"Go for it. There's plenty of ocean to go around," Elma said.

"Are you really going to jump into all that water?" Mimi asked. "That's…incredible."

“It isn’t, actually,” Chris said. “Oceans are made of saltwater, so it won’t be the kind you’re used to.”

“Seawater is salty?”

The girls started chatting about the ocean, and from what I heard, the oceans here sounded similar to the ones on Earth. No doubt, this planet’s sea life was very different, though. *Do mermaids exist? Given the aliens I’ve seen, it seems totally possible. I just hope they’re cute fantasy ones, instead of scary deep-sea ones.* I shuddered as I finished my dinner.

After dinner, I got ready for tomorrow and went to bed. Alone. Anything else didn’t seem appropriate with Chris around, and besides, I’d get my fill of the *sights* tomorrow.

***

The second floor of the lodge was full of bedrooms—five in total—and one bathroom. With the surplus of bedrooms, we each had our own room. Mine was the first one, so you had to walk past it to get downstairs. I was skimming through the Cierra System news on my terminal when I noticed somebody going downstairs.

It was around midnight; I had figured everyone else was asleep. Was it Elma, scrounging around for a drink before bed? I was getting a little thirsty myself, so I decided to get some water. I crawled out of bed and headed downstairs.

“Hm?” When I got down to the first floor, I found all the lights off. *Weird. I thought someone came down?* I raised an eyebrow and headed to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah…!”

I turned and saw Chris in her sleepwear, lying down on the couch. I could barely make out tears on her cheeks in the darkness. Her eyes looked red too. She rushed to get up and hide her face from me. *I already saw the whole thing, girl.*

I said nothing and sat a respectable distance to her right, opening the lid on my water bottle to take a drink. The sensation of cool water flowing down my throat was wonderful. *Now what do I do?*

"Aren't you tired?" I asked.

"Oh, not at all—"

"That's not good."

"Sorry." Her shoulders slumped as she looked straight ahead. In profile, I could see the bags under her eyes and that her eyes were indeed red.

"I'm the only one here; don't worry. You don't have to act tough just because you're a noble or whatever."

"…"

I held out my arm so she could bury her face in my chest. She began trembling. I patted her on the back as she cried, her hot tears soaking into my shirt. Maybe I wasn't in a position to say so, but she was a really sweet girl. I hadn't asked her exact age, but I'd definitely pegged Chris to be in her low teens. I'd heard that girls matured faster, but she was young enough to need her parents. She pulled herself together quickly though, emphasizing her strength. I wondered if Mimi had been a shoulder for her to cry on, and I was impressed by her fortitude.

"Wanna sleep together?" I asked.

"…Huh?"

"*Just* sleep, mind you. I'd feel bad sending you off to wake Mimi or Elma up."

I couldn't abandon Chris when she was upset and go to bed myself. Even I wasn't that heartless. I wasn't going to do anything bad, of course, and as we were alone except for Milo, I didn't think anyone else would find out.

"D-do you mean…?"

"Sleep only." I yawned. "I'm tired too." I screwed the cap back on the bottle and picked Chris up. *This counts as a princess carry, right? Chris is almost a princess.* "Let's go."

"O-okay."

I went upstairs to my room, still carrying Chris. The bed was a king-size, so we could sleep together without it being too cramped. I laid her gently on the bed and took a peek at her face. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and her face was beet red. *I know what you're trying to prepare for, but we're seriously not doing it.* I flicked her nose with my pointer finger and lay down next to her. *Mm, what a nice bed. It's about as good as mine on the Krishna.*

"Good night. Do you wanna use my arm as a pillow?" I offered.

"O-oh, no! That's not necessary!"

"A'ight." I closed my eyes. Chris fidgeted restlessly for a while, but eventually settled. *Is she asleep?* I asked myself before looking at her. "You were pretending."

"N-no, I was almost asleep…"

I really couldn't keep my eyes open any longer; I was dead tired. "Chris, it's okay to rely on me…" Nope, too tired. Even my enunciation was getting iffy. I thought I felt something warm against me before I fell asleep, but… *Good night.*

When I woke up, Chris's face was right in front of mine. Based on her breathing, she was deeply asleep, her strong-willed black eyes hidden behind her lids. Seeing her up close, I realized her eyelashes were quite long. A future beauty, indeed. For a moment, I wondered why she was in my bed, but then remembered the events of last night.

That's right. I brought her to bed because she couldn't sleep. It seemed careless in hindsight, but I hadn't done anything wrong. No harm, no foul. *I should have her sleep with Mimi or Elma from tonight on. I still don't want to do anything to her, but you never know what might happen when you share a bed.*

Since I didn't want to wake her by accident, I just watched her until I fell asleep again.

I woke up again when I felt movement beside me, and found a red-faced and wide-eyed Chris beside me. "Morning."

"G-g-good morning…"

“Calm down. We just slept next to each other. Notice how you’re fully clothed?” I stretched my sleepy body and sighed. My head felt awfully heavy, probably from sleeping in. Once I was up and mobile, it would probably get better. “Okay, time to wake up. Did you sleep well, Chris?”

“Y-yes, sir!” Chris was seated seiza-style on the bed, as if pleading for me to take things to the next level, but that wouldn’t happen, cute as she was.

I managed to get the stubborn girl out of bed and we went downstairs. There, Elma was already seated at the dining table.

When she saw the still-blushing Chris, she groaned. “Ugh. You said you weren’t gonna do anything. Y’know, there’s such a thing as working *too* fast.”

“I didn’t do anything! We just slept together,” I said as I sat down.

“‘Just slept together’? Well, you don’t look like you did anything, I guess,” Elma muttered, looking Chris up and down. Her clothes were the same ones she’d worn to bed last night, and we clearly hadn’t bathed yet. “So what’s the deal, then?”

“We can talk about it after Chris gets ready for the day.”

“O-okay!” Chris squeaked and ran off to the bathroom to wash her face.

After seeing her off, I looked back at Elma. “It seems like the shock of losing her parents hits hard when she’s alone. I came down to the living room, and she was crying.”

“Huh. She acts tough, but I wondered how she was holding up. Figures it was just an act.”

“Looks like it. Sorry, but could you and Mimi convince her to sleep with one of you tonight?”

“Mm… Okay. We’ll figure it out,” Elma said.

“Thanks. I couldn’t bear to see her crying on the couch.”

While we were talking, Mimi had woken up and come downstairs. “Good morning!”

“Morning.”

“Heya, Mimi,” I said with a wave. “You look energetic this morning.”

“Yes! I’m very excited to play in the sea.” She was always at maximum hype first thing in the morning.

“Once Chris comes down, I’ll wash my face and eat. What’s for breakfast today?” I asked.

The Maidroid next to the couch answered, “This morning’s meal is homemade toast with scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, sausage, and salad made from fresh vegetables, with a side of freshly squeezed juice. None of the food is synthesized.”

“That’s a heck of a bountiful meal.”

Once we ate, it would finally be time for the ocean. *Heh heh heh, I can’t wait to see what kind of swimsuits the girls picked.*

Chapter 7:
Can't Have a Beach Without Swimsuits! 'Nuff Said.

AFTER BREAKFAST, I tidied myself up, put on my swim gear, and decided to head straight to the beach. At times like this, men had it easy—strip, put on the trunks, and you're done. I also wore a jacket, just in case I got cold later. My handheld terminal was in its pocket, but I'd left my gun behind. I doubted I'd need it at the beach.

"I'm going on ahead!" I called out, going downstairs. "Milo, should we take anything?"

"No, the beach is already perfectly prepared for swimming. Umbrellas, beach chairs, drinks, and sunblock are all available."

"Nice. Okay, then. I'm off."

I put on the sandals I'd bought alongside my swim trunks and walked to the beach, which was visible from the living room. I could see beach chairs and umbrellas that hadn't been there yesterday. *When did they put those there?*

As I approached the beach, I saw three Maidroids waiting in the shade behind food-preparation stands. They waved at me as I walked up and I waved back. They gave me the sweetest smiles.

Aww, such nice smiles for machines. Though I guess that's pretty basic for machines in the Empire.

Clearly, the machines had learned to deal with human males well. I assumed the majority of the Empire population was human, as I'd only seen a few aliens. I wondered if other alien races had similar societies and thought I might do some research later.

My torso wasn't worth a show, so I unceremoniously took my jacket off and left it on a beach chair. The sea breeze felt lovely against my skin. I didn't want leg cramps, so I did some quick stretches. Stretches were really important before exercising; if it meant less injuries, I was all for a tiny bit of extra effort.

I felt eyes on me and found that the three Maidroids were looking my way. *What's up? They can't possibly be interested in my muscles. What do they want…? Eh, forget it.*

It was a while before the girls emerged from the lodge, wearing their swimsuits.

Hmm… They wore jackets too. Good decision, I'd say. It's warm now since it's sunny, but if it gets cloudy, we might get cold. Going in the ocean might make us cold too.

"Sorry for the wait," Mimi said.

"No prob," I replied. "It doesn't take me long to change clothes. Make sure you girls stretch before you swim. I don't want you drowning."

"I'm sure those rescue robots waiting in the water will help us if we need it," Elma said.

"Damn, they're thorough. Still, drowning is scary. And it hurts."

"I agree with that. Master Hiro, could you help me with my warm-up stretches?" Mimi was the first to remove her jacket and show off her swimsuit.

"Do you actually need help? Ah, heck with it."

"Erm, what do you think?" She fidgeted, hands behind her back.

"It's fantastic." I shot the nervous Mimi a thumbs-up. Her swimsuit was a very simple white bikini with a black border, and it displayed her chest well. It goes without saying, but the top was enormous, cradling her ample cleavage. *Thank you, God.* I put my hands together in front of my chest.

"Are you seriously praying?" Elma grumbled to herself.

Come on, now. This is a rare sight! A miraculous bod! I'll never get tired of her being short with such huge breasts.

"Don't just look at Mimi! I'm here too!" Elma yanked on my ear and made me look her way.

"Ow, ow, oww—ooh."

"What? Don't just 'ooh' me."

“I mean, you look good. You’re slender, toned, and you’ve got a really nice figure.” Elma’s swimsuit was a sporty black bikini. Her chest wasn’t even close to Mimi’s in size. Sad, but true. However, she had a perfect hourglass figure. It was like a work of art.

“Absolutely wonderful.” I said a prayer of thanks for Elma as well, and she slapped me. *Why?!*

“U-um, what do you think of my swimsuit?” Chris’s timid voice prompted me to turn around.

“Looking cute.” It was my honest opinion. She wore a one-piece suit with frills on the chest and hips. *Good thing it wasn’t a school swimsuit or a microbikini. If she wore one of those, I’d feel like a predator.*

“D-does it suit me?”

“Yeah, it does. I think it’s cute.”

Her fair, slender legs were especially eye-catching. She was youthful and vibrant, filled with the energy of life. I guess you could say she had the unique charm of a flower yet to bloom. But there was a definite sense of danger, like looking too long would be crossing a line. *I’d better not.*

“Why are you looking away from me?” she asked.

“I mean, it’s kinda uncomfortable if I stare at you, right? It feels like I’m going over the line.”

“But I don’t mind if you do…” Chris gave me an unbelievably charming smile.

“C’mon, let’s do those stretches. I’ll pair up with Mimi,” Elma said, unknowingly making things ten times worse while I shuddered at Chris’s grin.

“Okay!” Mimi joined her.

“I’m counting on you, Hiro.” Chris smiled again.

“Y-yeah.” I gave her a half-hearted smile and started to help her with her stretches. “You’re really flexible, Chris.”

“Yes, I’m quite proud of my flexibility. Hiro, could you push me from behind?”

“Sure.”

I pushed on her back as she spread her legs to either side, bending forward until she was almost touching the sand. Was this yoga? Mimi and Elma were flexible too, and thanks to Elma bending and folding my body lately, I was getting a little more flexible myself.

"Okay, girls," I announced. "Looks like our stretches are done. Let's get to swimming. Mimi, can you swim?"

"No. This is my first time."

"And Elma?"

"I can swim."

I nodded to her and looked back to Chris, who answered, "I can swim too."

"Good. Then I'll just teach Mimi."

"That'll work," Elma agreed. "But first we should put on some sunblock."

"Oh, true. Hey!" I waved over a Maidroid, who walked over with a basket in hand.

"Yes. Did you summon me?"

"Milo said you have sunblock. Can we have it?"

"Yes. We also have flotation rings and other toys."

"Oh, yeah, that sounds good."

"We will bring you a selection. We have many kinds of sunblock: cream, gel, lotion, and spray."

"Is there a difference?"

"No. They will all protect you from the sun's rays. It's just a matter of taste."

"Huh." I took each one and tried them on the back of my hand, testing how they felt. *I guess I'd prefer the lotion?* It was easy to apply.

Mimi picked the lotion as well, while Elma and Chris went for the cream.

“Let’s lotion each other up, since we can’t reach our own backs,” Elma said.

“Okay. Me and Mimi will pair up, then, since we have the same type.”

“Sure!” Mimi said. “I’d be glad to help you too.”

“Maybe I should’ve picked lotion…” Elma sighed.

Chris sighed too. “We’ve failed.”

“It’s not the end of the world, girls. You can put as much lotion on me as you want.” Well, we’d run out eventually, but if they wanted to touch me, they could just do it, as long as they didn’t pinch me.

“Let’s get to it, then.” Elma rushed me. “I’ll put a sheet down for you to lie on.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She unfurled a sheet onto the sand, and I lay on my stomach. I felt a chill when she put the sunblock on my back.

“His shoulders are so broad,” Chris commented.

“Yeah. His body isn’t too shabby,” Elma said.

Three pairs of hands rubbed my back and arms, making me feel awfully ticklish. The smallest hands rubbing my right shoulder blade must have been Chris’s, while the ones at my hips were Elma’s, and the ones on my neck and left shoulder were Mimi’s.

“Okay, back’s done. Roll over,” Elma commanded.

“Huh? Er, I can do my front myself.”

“If you want to make sure it’s even, it’s better to have someone else do it. You don’t want to get burned in spots.”

“Mgh, okay.” Elma was right. If I missed any spots, I’d look awfully lame. So I obediently rolled over.

“W-wow, your abs…” Chris was in awe.

“He never misses a day of training,” Mimi explained.

“Feels good, right? I hope he maintains these,” Elma said.

“Girls…”

Chris blushed and felt up my abs with great interest, while Elma carefully applied lotion all over my arms, and Mimi attended to my neck and collarbone with great enthusiasm. Elma was fine, but it seemed like the other girls had forgotten the point of all this.

“Okay, you’re all lotioned up.”

“Thanks, Elma. Seems like you’re the only one who took it seriously.”

“I-I was also serious.”

“M-me too!”

“Sure you were. Okay, now it’s my turn. Elma, can you get Chris’s back?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Elma laid out another sheet. Once Chris was on it, she started rubbing cream on her.

Mimi switched places with me, lying down on my sheet.

“Th-thank you,” she said in advance.

“No prob,” I said as I started to undo Mimi’s bikini.

“Huh?!”

“What? Don’t you want to be completely covered?”

“Y-yes, I suppose.”

We’d seen each other naked plenty of times, so I wasn’t sure why she was embarrassed. After Mimi had calmed, I poured plenty of lotion onto her back.

“Mmm!” she yelped.

“It startles you with how cold it is, right? Just hang on.”

“Okay. Your hands are warm.”

I spread the lotion over Mimi’s back. *Ahh, her skin is so fine. It’s soft and firm at the same time. I could touch her all day.*

But I remained controlled and diligently covered her in sunblock, from her upper back to her shoulders, arms, neck, and behind her ears. “Next is your lower body.”

“Th-this is strangely embarrassing.”

I untied Mimi’s bikini bottom and covered her whole lower body in sunblock lotion. She had a really, really smoking hot bod. She had been a little malnourished when she first came aboard the Krishna, but once she got some food and exercise, she’d filled out. Though she sometimes complained she wanted to be thinner. Good thing I’d messed with her AI trainer! I definitely wanted her to maintain her current figure. Her breasts were great, and so were her thighs.

“Okay, all done.”

“Thank you.”

“Now your front.”

She gulped. “…Okay.”

Mimi sat up, blushed, and lay on her back, holding her top in place as her two deadly weapons bounced around. With her top untied, it offered no support. I wanted to offer up another prayer, but I didn’t want a Muay Thai body kick from Elma, so I hardened my heart and applied the lotion. I was as close to nirvana as ever in that moment.

“M-mmn…”

When I poured more lotion on her, Mimi let out an enticing moan. *Gah! God, are you testing me?!* I had been abstaining since Chris had come aboard. *Cease, beast within! Now is not the time to go wild!* With all of my mental strength, I suppressed my urges and finished applying Mimi’s sunblock. The arduous battle left me fully exhausted.

“Master Hiro?” Mimi said after fixing her swimwear.

I closed my eyes and tried to meditate. “Let’s take a breather.” I had to calm down, in more ways than one. I tried to recall the face of the old man back at Tarmein Prime’s mercenary guild.

“What are you doing?” Elma sighed in exasperation. “Jeez.”

“Just a little longer… Or maybe I could use a configurator, and…” Chris felt her own chest and muttered something to herself.

I didn’t know what a configurator was, but I figured she should stay away from it. *Keep being the Chris you are, okay?*

“We apologize for the wait. We have prepared a variety of toys for you.” While I recovered, the three Maidroids appeared with a ton of floaties in tow. There were normal donut rings, one the size of a small boat, one shaped like a dolphin, one shaped like a shark, and more. Why a shark? Not that it mattered, really.

“You don’t have to force yourself to swim at first,” I told Mimi. “It’s fun even if you take baby steps with a floatie.”

“Yeah!” Elma agreed. “Try something like a normal ring-shaped one first.”

“I want to use this one.” Chris picked up the shark-shaped floatie, while Elma grabbed a large ring, the kind where you plunked your butt in the middle.

“Which one should I choose?” Mimi asked me.

“Try the donut one, I say.” I picked up one that was slightly smaller than Elma’s and handed it to Mimi.

“Are you not going to use one?”

“I’m fine for now. Maybe later, though.” After all, I was going to stay with her at first.

“Well? Let’s get to it, girls!” Elma called.

Thus, we began our beach day. I was beyond excited—it had been so long since my last beach trip.

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“Wooow,” Mimi gasped. “It feels like the colony’s low-gravity districts.” She looked happy as could be, floating around in her little ring.

“Yeah, you might be right there.”

The sun was blazing bright, the ocean was the perfect temperature, and Mimi’s breasts were bouncing with the waves. *Resorts are the best!*

“Guh…” Chris groaned, trying desperately to keep up with us as she straddled her shark floatie. Unlike Elma, she still had plenty of time to grow, so I doubted she needed to worry. Elma didn’t have a chance, but she was amazing just how she was.

“Just floating is fun too!” Mimi squealed.

“Totally, right?” I was also enjoying myself. “If you kick your legs in the water like Chris, you can move a bit.”

“I’ll try!” Mimi leaned forward and started kicking. As she did, her breasts squished wonderfully against the donut.

Nice. Keep doing that.

Meanwhile, Elma was off floating in the distance. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

“I’m going forward! Look, I’m doing it!”

“Nice, nice! Keep it up!” *Remember: positive reinforcement.*

Mimi went wild, swimming back and forth with her floatie. It was always fun when things worked out the first time.

“Hey, girls. Let’s all race to see who can get to Elma first!”

“Sure!”

“I won’t lose!”

Mimi and Chris started swimming toward Elma. Chris was practiced, but her tiny legs made it hard for her to go fast. Meanwhile, Mimi’s inexperience made her movements clumsy, but she’d built up strength after all her workouts. It was a pretty even match. And me? It wouldn’t have been fair if I’d actually tried. Though it had been a long time since I’d gone swimming, I wouldn’t lose. So I held back.

“Boom! I win!” Chris declared as the shark floatie collided into Elma.

“Aww, I lost!”

“Ugh, can you drop the ‘boom’ thing?” Though she sounded annoyed, Elma was smiling.

“Can you swim, Elma?” I asked her.

“I can, but it’s nice to sunbathe once in a while, y’know?”

“That’s very true.”

You couldn’t sunbathe on a spaceship, after all. Any useful cosmic rays were nullified by the shields and plating, so being on the ship meant no sunlight at all. Colonies had facilities where you could enjoy sunlight without the negative effects, but unfortunately, I had never used one.

After the race, Mimi and Chris continued to swim around together, towing poor Elma with them.

“Mimi, let’s take a little break,” I suggested.

“But I’m not tired yet.”

“Swimming is more tiring than it seems, and it’s really easy to pull a muscle if you get too cold.”

“Is that true?”

“Yep. Besides, swimming isn’t the only fun you can have on the beach.” Chasing waves on the shore, feeling your feet sink into the sand as the waves washed over them, and playing games on the beach were fun too. We all decided to hang out on the beach as a break.

“Hawhaa?!” Mimi yelped. “This feels really weird!”

“Doesn’t it?” Chris giggled. “But it’s fun!”

“It tickles. Yes, it is fun, in a way,” Elma said.

Mimi frolicked around on the shoreline while Chris watched her and giggled. Nothing could replicate the feeling of the sand underfoot being snatched away by the water and flowing between your toes.

“Whoa, now,” I warned. “A big wave is coming.”

"Oh!"

I picked Chris up to keep her above the big wave. It only came up to my knees, but it could've hit her right in the face if she'd stayed there. Mimi was tripped up by the wave and fell spectacularly.

She coughed up water. "Hrk… S-salty…"

"Are you okay? Any sand in your eyes?" I asked Mimi, still holding Chris.

Fortunately, she wasn't actually hurt. "I'm okay! The sea is really fun!" Water dripped off of her as she cast a big smile my way.

I'm glad you're having a good time.

"Oh, sorry for picking you up without warning, Chris."

"It's all right. Thank you." Chris smiled, her feet on the sand again.

Aww, cute. Someone might think I was on the edge of doing something bad, holding up a young girl in a swimsuit, and if we'd been in Japan, the police might have been all over me, even though I'd been protecting her. *You've got it all wrong! I just saved her life!*

Afterward, we made piles of sand, knocked them down, built sand castles, buried Elma when she fell asleep and made her really mad, and generally enjoyed ourselves.

"It's about time for lunch, isn't it?" I asked after a while.

"I am starving!" Mimi said.

Chris nodded meekly. "I'm a little hungry too."

I looked at the Maidroids, who were barbecuing. *I get it. Barbecue at the beach, huh? Now that's living. I guess it's technically grilling, but if it were real barbecue, we wouldn't get to eat until tomorrow!*

Mimi, Chris, and I walked to the nearby shower room to rinse off the saltwater and sand. By the time I returned, the barbecue was almost ready. Elma was watching the Maidroids from under the umbrella, sitting comfortably in her beach chair.

"Any rare foods today?" I asked.

“Hm?” She looked up at me. “I guess fresh meat and veggies are rare for us, but I’d say those traditional cooking utensils are rarer.”

“Traditional?” I cocked my head and looked at the grill. As far as I could tell, it didn’t use coal or gas; it looked electronic. *Where is the power supply? Oh, I guess they have energy packs for laser guns, something similar could power a grill for cooking. No need to get so worked up, Hiro.*

“Nowadays, single-function cooking utensils and appliances aren’t common,” Elma explained. “Only hobbyists and professional chefs use them.”

“R-really?” To me, the grill almost looked futuristic, but given this universe’s standards, I could understand. After all, this universe could create delicious food from *cartridges* using even low-quality cookers.

While we watched the Maidroids prep our meal, Mimi and Chris returned back from their showers. Once Mimi saw the barbecue grill and food, she was over the moon.

I love your love of food.

Chris didn’t seem very impressed, but maybe she’d seen a grill before.

“Let’s get cooking!” I said. After checking the temp on the grill, I used the tongs to place meat and veggies on it. Elma, Mimi, and Chris watched and… *Wait, why does everyone look surprised?*

“Can you even cook?” Elma asked.

“Ex-*cuse* me?” I looked at her, shocked. *What does she mean by “cook”? You just heat the stuff up and eat it! This hardly enters the realm of cooking.* “I wouldn’t call this cooking. It’s just barbecuing.” I pointed at bottles sitting next to me, looked over to the Maidroids, and asked, “Is this seasoning?”

“Yes. In order, they are…” In addition to salt and pepper, the Maidroid listed off seasonings I’d never heard of.

While everyone watched, I checked the progress of the meat and veggies and added some seasonings. *Oh, right. You’re supposed to use different tongs for the raw meat and the cooked to avoid cross-contamination and illness.* Apparently, you could seriously reduce the

chances of getting the runs after barbecues by keeping your tongs off the raw food, or cleaning them in between. I didn't want to give any of the girls stomach trouble, so I was extra careful, even if it was possible that the meat was disinfected with some tech I wasn't aware of.

What meat is this, anyway? Beef? Pork? Based on the texture, it looks like beef.

"Hey, is this beef or pork?" I asked. "Will it be okay cooked rare or medium rare, instead of well done?"

"It is beef. It has been disinfected, so it is perfectly edible rare."

"Neat. Mimi, yours is all done!"

"O-okay. Ah, it's delicious…"

"I think it's just good meat," I replied. "I only added salt and pepper. You could put this sauce on if you want."

Mimi added my recommended sauce and stuffed her face. Her eyes were downright glowing, so it must have been tasty. The sauce I'd picked was similar to a Japanese yakiniku sauce. It was a little sweet and fruity.

"And there we have it!" I announced as I finished cooking. "You two can eat now."

"Thanks. You're surprisingly skilled," Elma said.

"Were you a chef once, Hiro?" Chris asked.

"A chef?" I blushed. "C'mon, really, I just barbecued it."

"If you can cook raw meat and make it tasty, that's chef-tier to me."

"I agree!"

"You think?"

Those were awfully low standards for a chef, but given that automatic cookers were the norm, maybe it was unusual for someone to cook at all. Maybe once they'd had to take ingredients into space or use what they found on planets as they traveled, but technology had come a long way. The space explorers of old would never have passed down any cooking skills, thus it was surprising even now to see someone capable of turning raw food into edible food.

“It just feels ridiculous to call this cooking, y’know? The Maidroids would be better chefs than me. I should’ve let them do it.” I tried to hand them the tongs, but they shook their heads at once.

“We are able to cook, if you wish, but we believe your companions would prefer your cooking.”

Umm…? I looked at the girls. Mimi was nodding with her cheeks stuffed full of meat, and Elma was thrusting her plate my way as if to say, *“Just gimme the meat!”*

“Meat, please,” she demanded.

“Yeah, yeah. You too, Chris?”

“Yes!” Chris said excitedly.

I ended up cooking meat, veggies, and even some seafood for a while. It definitely added some flavor to our day at the beach.

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“That was delicious!” Mimi said, beaming.

“Good to know. I hear it’s not good to exercise or swim right after you eat, so let’s take a nice long rest to let the food settle.”

We left cleanup to the Maidroids and lay down in our respective beach chairs. Stories of people dying because they got stomach cramps sounded far-fetched, but it was possible for the motion of the water to make you feel sick, and you couldn’t swim while you were throwing up.

“That was a heck of a meal,” Elma said. “Really, Hiro, I didn’t think you’d have skills like that.”

“I keep telling you, anyone can grill meat. Heat it enough to be edible but not burn, throw on some sauce or salt, and eat. It’s as easy as that. I can’t agree with calling that real cooking.”

“Are you able to do more complex cooking?” Mimi asked.

“As long as I have the ingredients, sure.” I’d lived by myself for a pretty long time. I couldn’t make dashi from scratch, though, and I couldn’t

begin to explain how bouillon worked. Don't even get me started on curry.

"Th-then I want you to make us a meal tonight!" she begged.

"Already talking about dinner after you've just eaten lunch, huh? Can we do that, though?" I glanced over at the Maidroid standing next to us.

She nodded. "Yes. Some customers only eat food made by their personal chefs, so we offer an ingredient delivery service."

"Right," Chris chimed in. "Imperial nobles, especially those among the highest classes, see personal chefs as a status symbol. I would expect resorts to make accommodations for such people."

I guess that makes sense.

We talked with the Maidroid about the ingredients for dinner. We learned they could help us cook as well.

"What should I make? If I'm taking the time for it, I guess I should go all out, right?"

Boiled fish, maybe? Nah, I should avoid anything with fine bones. Mimi's only ever eaten food from cartridges, and I could see the bones getting caught in her throat and making her cry. I could do sashimi. Can you eat the fish here as sashimi? I guess I can ask later. Let's make the main dishes sashimi and deep-fried food. I don't know what meat they have, but fried pork or fish ought to be just fine. And I'd like rice to go with it. Do they have rice…? And do they have rice cookers? Another question for the Maidroids. I think it'd be perfect with some miso soup too, but who knows if they have miso?

"Can I ask a few questions?"

"Yes."

I asked about the ingredients and utensils I wanted, and the Maidroid answered promptly. In short, we could get everything except the rice cooker, but they could deliver fresh-cooked rice.

"You're all thorough as hell, aren't you?" I said, amazed.

"Why, yes. Thank you."

"Incredible," Mimi gasped. "Such a specialized conversation…"

“Hiro is clearly more than a mercenary,” Chris agreed. “He’s a chef too!”

Elma shrugged. “Given his background, it doesn’t sound all that surprising.”

“Do you know his background?” Chris asked.

“A little. It’d be rude for me to spill the beans, though.”

The girls chatted while I discussed dinner plans with the Maidroid. I definitely wasn’t going to tell Chris about my background; there was little point and a whole lot of risk. She seemed to admire me for some reason, but she was even younger than Mimi. At least, I thought she was.

Once I finished ordering ingredients, we got back to playing on the beach. I wanted to go fishing to get fresh fish for dinner, but if I did, Mimi or Chris would want to come. And if they did, their swimsuits wouldn’t cut it. It would be dangerous to go to an islet in sandals; one little slip could be fatal. So we just continued our fun in the sun.

“Take this! Ha ha ha!” I laughed.

“Eek!” Mimi squealed. “I’ll get you back for that!”

We splashed each other by the shore and swam around a bit more. Mimi had mastered the art of wading in the water quickly, though I wasn’t sure whether she was getting better or just being held up by her boobs. Once you were wading, it was easy to start swimming. We’d have to practice putting her face in the water, but first, we tried the breaststroke, which was the most instinctual style.

“I did it! I’m swimming!”

“Great job, Mimi! You learned fast!” Even if she could hardly swim two yards, I praised her. Praise was important. Besides, I wasn’t exactly a professional swimmer myself.

Watching her having a good time was great. Very, very fun. Not only was she bouncing around, but I also got to touch her a lot. Nice. Awesome, even.

Chris let out a little grunt of frustration. “Ngh…”

“You’re just stressing yourself out,” Elma said with a sigh.

“Hiro! Look at me too!” While I watched Mimi swimming in the weaker waves, Chris pulled on my arm and pouted.

“Sorry, Chris. I feel like I’ll get arrested if I look at you.” I didn’t wanna gawk at an underage girl; it just stank of crime. If a guy like me stared at girls like Chris at the beach, it would surely summon the cops and be a whole big deal.

“We’re the only ones here.” Elma shrugged. “Who’s gonna arrest you?”

“The Milo robots?”

“As long as you don’t do anything insane, I doubt you’ll be arrested…” She sighed again in irritation.

Okay, sure, but imagine this. I scream, “I love little girls! They make me feel so good!” How does that make you feel? Cringe, right? I would NEVER do that.

“I guess it is unfair to give Mimi all this attention, though.”

“That’s right.”

“Yup.”

Chris and Elma agreed. I looked at Elma, thinking she might want some attention as well.

She blushed and averted her gaze. “What? Is that so wrong?”

“Not at all,” I assured her. That said, there was only one of me. “Let’s start with Chris, then. Elma, can you watch Mimi? She’s still a beginner.”

“Gotcha, boss.” Elma really was mature when it came to stuff like this.

We left her to deal with Mimi and headed to the pile of floaties.

“Should we play with these?” Chris asked me.

“Nah. *That’s* what I’m after.” I pointed at a rubber raft that could fit us both with ease. It came with simple oars, so we could paddle our way around, and it was transparent so we could see underwater. “It’ll be fun to take a look around under the waves. Fortunately, the water is calm, so we’re in no danger of capsizing.”

“That does sound fun.”

We grabbed the rubber raft from the pile and dragged it over to shore, where I helped Chris get on.

“Aren’t you getting in?” she asked.

“I am, don’t worry, once the water is deep enough.” I pushed the raft away from the shoreline, and then climbed on. “How about we go out into the open sea?”

“Okay.”

I used the oars to pilot the raft, and it went surprisingly fast. Was it because Chris was light, or because the raft was made with water-resistant material? Or was I just getting stronger?

“Goodness, you’re quite strong,” Chris said.

“Pssh, this is easy. Ooh, it’s getting deep.” We looked through the bottom of the boat and saw sea life under us. *I see… Uh, what the heck?* “Chris, what’s that?”

“It’s called a filletsalmon.”

“Oookay.”

I watched the fish—which really did resemble a fillet of salmon—swim by. *That’s a living thing, and not just a cut of meat? I think I’m going insane. Is this like how if you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back? Am I using that adage wrong? Maybe I’m just panicking.*

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. These are just some crazy critters here.” I could see what looked like a fish with legs wearing fishnet stockings, a fish with a cat-like upper body, and some other hideous species. I was planning to fish the next day, but was it even safe? Would my sanity score go into the red if I caught these fish?

Then, a mermaid with the upper body of a gorgeous woman swam underneath us, scaring the fish away as she waved. *Now this is more like it.*

“She’s…not human, is she?” Chris cocked her head as she waved back.

“Right,” I confirmed. “You can see machine parts around her ears. She must be an android made for the ocean.”

“A rescue android, perhaps?”

“Maybe. If our boat capsizes, she might come help us.” A mermaid android. A Mermaidroid. When there weren’t customers around, she probably managed the ocean environment. “Ooh. Look at that pretty school of fish.”

“My, it is pretty. So many colors…”

A school of colorful, tropical, sardine-looking fish swam by, accompanied by cushion-like rays. The sun blazed overhead while endless white clouds drifted along the horizon.

“Ahh…” I sighed. “Feels like a long time since I’ve had some peace.”

“You say peace, but my uncle is still after us… Does mercenary work always involve killing?”

“Surprisingly, no. There’s a lot of tension in fighting and ambushing pirates, but the rest of the work is pretty lighthearted. We mainly do jobs that involve killing pirates.”

“Do you have jobs other than fighting pirates?”

“Not really, but other mercs guard merchants, protect colonies, and do recon work.”

Some mercenaries did spy work, taking advantage of their ability to move freely between colonies. Others went around and killed illegal residents and gangs in colonies. Some even carried out assassinations. Though, as an upstanding merc who specialized in cleaning up space pirates, it was all unknown to me.

“Do you not do such work?” Chris asked.

“Nope. I don’t like close-quarters combat, and it’s out of the question for Mimi. I’m not gonna make Elma do it just because she’s good at it. I figured it’s best if I stick to what I’m best at, which is cleaning up pirates.”

“Best for you and for the universe…”

“Honestly, my reasons aren’t that noble. It’s just easy and profitable for me.”

“Goodness. You had me impressed, but that ruined it.” Chris giggled.

I wasn’t trying for laughs, but I was glad I got one. We continued to enjoy a nice chat on the rubber raft.

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“Good job out there,” Elma said in greeting.

“Yeah, thanks.”

After getting back to the beach, I accepted a water bottle from Elma and lay down in a beach chair. Chris had asked a lot of questions about me, and being careful about what I said was exhausting. She had seemed satisfied after hearing about the mercenary life, and now she and Mimi were bashing their shark and dolphin floaties into each other. I wondered if that was all they were going to do, but then they started racing again. *Must be fun.*

“I’m glad we got a moment of peace.” I sighed.

“You worry too much. We took down our pursuers, and we put out a whole load of misinformation. They won’t attack us here, trust me. Even if they figure out where we are, they can’t attack a resort planet.” Elma called a Maidroid over and ordered a drink. She sure was enjoying herself.

“Did you see how many ships they rounded up in a single day? I say we err on the side of caution.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re right. But what can we do? Milo is protecting this planet.”

“Can we really be that complacent…?” We had arrived yesterday. I doubted Chris’s uncle would show up today or tomorrow, but whenever he did, he wouldn’t be alone, and he’d be sure he could finish us off. I didn’t like that thought.

“If you’re worried, I’m a good listener.”

“Not sure I like how you said that…”

I was afraid of what would happen if her uncle pulled out all the stops to kill Chris. They could rent another lodge on Cierra III to get past the defenses and get close to us. It was also possible they'd send a ton of battleships, take down Milo's defense system, and then use orbital bombardment to finish us off. Once my mind drifted to the bad things, it never stopped.

"Mmm," Elma moaned. "White clouds, blue sky, bright sun, and a cold drink. This is paradise."

"Dude, it's barely after noon and you're already drinking?"

"Who cares? We're on vacation! Might as well let my hair down." She smirked, lifting a glass of some tropical beverage.

Good for her, having fun. In all honesty, the beach really was the best. I just couldn't fully enjoy it with circumstances as they were.

"Jeez, you're kind of a coward."

"Shut up. What's wrong with a mercenary being a bit of a coward?" I asked the Maidroid to bring me the golden carbonated drink I hadn't tried yet. "I wonder how good the security actually is. Think we can trust it?"

"Like I said before, they would need machine intelligence with a positronic brain like Milo's to get past it. And machine intelligence wouldn't help them kill anyone."

"I see. But what if they just used brute force to destroy the security system?"

"Brute force? It would be more realistic for them to send people down to assassinate us directly. Even if they were on another island, Milo would arrest them if they left it."

"Can't they go by ocean, or fly in with a ship like the Krishna?"

"Not gonna happen. There are Milo terminals everywhere, so they'd be found out fast. Milo can send out an attack squad using the mass driver, or arrest squads, or straight ammunition. They also have a defense platform in orbit for orbital attacks, so attacking us is gonna be *tough*. Although the Krishna might be able to do it."

"When you put it like that, it sounds like one hell of a defense system."

While we talked, a Maidroid returned with a glass of golden soda on a tray.

"Thanks," I said. "Sorry to trouble you."

"This is all part of our work; do not worry." The Maidroid smiled at me.

"Are we screwed if they throw a saturation attack our way?" I asked Elma.

"You mean something that overpowers all the defenses of this planet? I don't think that's realistic."

"It doesn't have to be aimed at us. What if they attack the Accumulation and Assembly Site on the equator, where Milo is hosted? Can't they throw a bunch of flak or space debris at the planet as a saturation attack? And if they destroy the defense platform, are they free to use orbital bombardment?"

"That's all illogical. They could try an obvious attack like that, but Milo or this planet's sensor arrays would notice all the asteroids and space debris moving and alert the fleet. Then, they'd have to deal with both Milo's defense platforms *and* the Imperial Fleet."

"Gotcha." It sounded like all my worst-case scenarios had been thought of. "But Milo can't be invincible, right?"

"Of course not. They could use orbital bombardment if they have the power to take down the defense platform fast. Milo can resist attacks to an extent, but it'll be bad if they mess with us from orbit."

"Wouldn't it be possible to recruit space pirates until they have enough strength?"

"I won't say no, but…if they took too long, the fleet would come running. It would be risky."

"Uncertain, but still threatening. If they do that, should we hole up in the Krishna, dodge their orbital bombardment, and try to hold out until the fleet arrives?"

"Yeah. I think that's the best idea." Elma agreeing gave me some relief. I also felt better now that we had a basic plan in place if the worst-case scenario came to pass.

“Quite the disquieting conversation you’re having,” the Maidroid said.

I said nothing and just drank my golden soda through a straw. *Mmm. Strong carbonation, refreshing taste, and just the right amount of sweetness. This is absolutely ginger ale.*

“As the manager of this planet’s security, is there anything that I should know?” the Maidroid asked.

“What do you think?” I turned to Elma.

“We can’t really talk about it.”

“Our client is Chris, after all,” I said. I called to the girls still swimming, and they raced back to shore.

“I win!” Chris pumped both hands in triumph.

“Aww. I lose again…” Mimi sighed in frustration.

The more time I spent with Mimi and Chris, the closer in age they seemed, but maybe Chris appeared older because of her maturity.

“Do you need anything?” Chris asked.

“Milo wants to know what’s going on, since it has to protect us.”

“What’s…going on?”

“Yes,” the Maidroid said. “If you expect danger, I would like to know more.”

Water dripped from Chris’s swimsuit as she hummed in thought. Mimi looked a little flustered and unsure of what to do, so I offered her my ginger ale to try. With one sip, her eyes went wide.

Ha ha ha! That never gets old.

“What should I say?” Chris asked Elma and me.

“I think we should tell Milo the truth and try to work together,” I replied. “But I don’t know how Milo might hurt Count Dalenwald, so I can’t tell you what to do.”

“I figure we can trust the Empire’s machine intelligence to an extent,” Elma added. “This is a battle of noble succession, and they love to manage nobles.”

Chris chuckled; it seemed machine intelligence had a lot to do with keeping the Grakkan nobility upright. “Without my grandfather’s approval, I feel rather uncomfortable sharing our secrets.”

“Didn’t he already mess up by letting his kids get to the point where they’re literally killing each other over succession?”

“Uh-huh.” Elma nodded.

“I suppose I can’t object…” Chris heaved a sigh and began explaining her circumstances to the Maidroid, which was, like all machines on the island, connected to Milo.

“I see the issue now. It will take me some time to look into countermeasures.” The Maidroid glanced upward for less than ten—no, less than five—seconds. “I have harvested a variety of information, including data about the passenger ship attack from three months ago.”

“That was fast,” I said, impressed by the power of machine intelligence.

“Not especially. My duty is to protect those who stay at Cierra III, and I will solemnly uphold that duty.”

“Would you end up blacklisting us if we brought trouble here?” I asked.

“No, we would never. Regardless of your circumstances, you are customers, and I will uphold my duty until the moment you leave this planet.”

“Really?”

“Yes. That is my job.” The Maidroid nodded. “I will notify you at the first sign of danger. You may rest at ease.” She smiled reassuringly at Chris.

It seemed like we might be able to count on Milo’s support, though things rarely went so well for us, and who knew how deeply the AI would get involved.

“It’s about quitting time,” I declared. “Let’s shower and get back to the lodge. We’re going to be here for a while, so let’s not exhaust ourselves.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Elma said. She was already drinking, so she’d probably been willing to take it easy from the start.

“Okay,” Mimi sighed. “We can have more fun tomorrow.”

“Yeah, for sure. And we can find a fun spot other than the beach. Cool with that, Chris?”

“Yes!”

With Chris’s agreement, we headed to the shower room, washed away the sweat and sand, and went back to the lodge.

I just hope we can get through to Chris’s grandfather before anything bad happens or we have to leave. Will things go that smoothly, though?

Chapter 8:
My Perfect Maidroid

IT WAS OUR FIFTH DAY on the resort planet Cierra III.

We'd shopped, played on the beach, and checked out some of the other leisure activities on offer. We had also played golf and gone on hikes, taking the nature in; Mimi had been over the moon to see the flora and fauna of the island. On the fourth day, we hung out in the lodge to recover from our activities. We watched holo-movies and played board and card games. There was a game like sugoroku—similar to snakes and ladders—as well as a deck of playing cards and a game that was basically Jenga.

We had planned to be here for two weeks, so we still had more than half of our vacation left ahead of us. I dozed in bed on the fifth morning, wondering what we should do that day. Suddenly, someone rocked me awake.

Who is that? Mimi? Chris? It's probably not Elma; she would be more direct. She'd pull the whole blanket off me. This is so subdued that it must be…Chris? I still haven't gotten my eight hours, but I can't ignore her, so I guess I'll get up.

"Good morning, Master." A black-haired maid looked down at me expressionlessly. She was wearing half-rimmed glasses with red frames.

Oh, I know who this is. She's the Maidroid I designed a few days ago.

“Am I dreaming, or what?” I didn’t need to see her in my dreams too. I shut my eyes and started to doze off… *Huh? What?!* “Guh?!”

“Your level of wakefulness has suddenly risen. Good morning to you again, Master.”

Her eyes, though cool and beautiful, watched me with love and loyalty. Her glossy black hair was capped by a white maid’s brim, and she was dressed head to toe in a long maid’s dress. If not for the mechanical bits near her ears, she would have looked completely human.

Wait, none of that matters—the problem is that she’s right in front of me right now, like it’s normal. There is no more pressing issue right now. No, wait, correction: if anyone comes to attack Chris, that’s a slightly more urgent problem.

“Master, mind your manners. It is polite to return a greeting.”

“Good morning.”

“Yes. Well done.” The Maidroid stroked my hair.

What’s going on? I mean, I know what’s going on. I understand what is currently happening, but my brain is refusing to process it. “This isn’t a dream I’m going to wake up from, is it?”

“No.”

“Wow…” I’d get nightmares if I went back to sleep, so I gave up and got out of bed.

“I’ve prepared a change of clothes.”

“Thanks.” I reluctantly took the clothes she handed me the moment I stood up. As I changed, I asked, “Why are you watching?”

“I must have your bodily data, Master.”

“Uh, okay…?” It seemed there was no way I could get her to leave, so I gave up and finished changing. The maid took my discarded undergarments with alarming speed. “What is happening here?”

“As you have surmised, Captain Hiro, I am a custom Maidroid made to your specifications. I have no name yet.”

“I see.”

“Under the orders of Milo, the machine intelligence managing Cierra III, I will serve as your personal Maidroid for the remainder of your stay. I hope we have a fruitful time together.” The Maidroid bowed, still holding my dirty underwear.

“Okay. I guess there’s no point in refusing, right?”

“If you refuse, I will be released from my duty.”

“That so?”

“Yes. I will then lie dormant in storage.”

“Milooo!” I couldn’t help but scream. Trying to gain my trust or sympathy or whatever this way was wrong—how did a machine know the male heart so well?

“That is what I was told to say. However, there is no merit in dismantling and storing a finished machine. I would more likely be transferred.”

“O-oh, okay. I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Despite the temporary nature of this arrangement, you are my master, Captain Hiro. It is natural that I would prioritize you.”

Tch. Something about this is tugging at the heartstrings. It’s easy to assume Milo did this, but I know I’m the one who set her love and loyalty parameters so high. Milo didn’t do anything except have her built. “I’m starting to distrust machine intelligence,” I groaned.

“I can sympathize with you. Despite knowing I am an extension of Milo, I must make you aware that I am also an individual,” the custom Maidroid said quietly as she looked me in the eye. Without much emotion, she was hard to read.

“I’ll trust you for now. Even if you’re lying, I hope you can at least keep the illusion going.”

“I will give my life if necessary to be worthy of your faith.” The custom Maidroid bowed.

I decided to stop being hostile toward her, and instead tried to figure out how I’d introduce her to the girls. *Ugh, it’s too early for this headache.*

***

“Excuse me, Miss Mimi?”

“…”

“Miss Mimi?”

“Grr…”

“Not gonna work,” Elma said.

“No, it’s not,” Chris echoed.

Let’s roll things back a bit. After getting ready for the day and leaving my bedroom, I went to the living room and waited for the girls to come down.

Elma was first. She saw me sitting on the couch, and the Maidroid standing next to me. After three long seconds, she let out an “Oh.” It seemed she understood.

Next up was Chris. She looked at us sleepily and continued on her way to the bathroom. As the scene clicked, she did a triple-take, looking from me, to the Maidroid, to Elma, and back again over and over before she sighed. I was glad I didn’t have to explain it to her.

Then came Mimi.

The instant she saw us, she put herself between me and the custom Maidroid and clung to my arm, growling.

What are you, a puppy? “Mimi, you don’t have to be so aggressive. She’s not here to do any evil.”

Mimi just clung to me tighter, pressing her chest against me as a result, which was wonderful.

Hiro, cut it out, I admonished myself. *Mimi thinks this Maidroid is going to take you away from her. Figure out how you’re gonna fix this!*

“Master, I would like an opportunity to speak with Mimi.”

“Sure. Mimi, don’t be stubborn and actually talk to the Maidroid. I won’t say anything.”

"Mgh… As long as Elma and Chris are here."

"Huh? Why?" Elma raised an eyebrow.

"And me? I don't mind, but…" Chris seemed equally confused.

The three of them went to the dining table with Maidroid in tow.

Should I, like, not be here? Even this far away, I'll hear them just fine. "I'm gonna check on the Krishna," I announced.

"Okay. I'll send you a text when we're done."

I waved to Elma and headed to where the Krishna was docked. Despite being on the ground, it still looked as valiant as ever, and upon closer inspection, it seemed like it had been cleaned as well. Was this Milo's doing?

I climbed inside and ran a diagnostic program. No problems reported, so we were ready to fly anytime. We were a little low on flak due to not resupplying after the battle, but that wasn't a huge problem right now. Milo had declined to replace our ammunition when I asked, telling me it wasn't a service that fit the aesthetic of the resort.

Since I was on the Krishna, I decided to do some exercise, even though I didn't feel like I had missed any training. After my workout, I threw my clothes I was wearing into the automatic washer-dryer combo and got into the fully automatic bath. It made me wonder if I was essentially the same as the clothes in the wash.

What's that? Stop trying to avoid reality? Wow, rude. But consider this: Would I think of a successful plan just because I spent the whole time stressing about that custom Maidroid? No, I would not. I could just see myself falling into Milo's trap and pressing that Purchase button. I tried not to think about it. *Gah, I'm already falling for it! I can't think of anything but buying it! Gah, this is my fault for making my perfect Maidroid without reading the terms and conditions! Okay, okay. Let's think about it from another angle. What would I gain from buying her?*

With the specs I had given her, she would be able to support and guard both Mimi and Elma. That would especially be helpful for Mimi, as she would be able to run errands more safely. This universe was a violent

one, and sometimes I wasn't sure *I* was safe without power armor. That made custom Maidroids particularly useful helpers.

I didn't know anything about maintaining Maidroids, but I had selected durable materials for her construction, so hopefully, she wouldn't need too much maintenance. We didn't have a room for her, but if we could sacrifice a bit of cargo space, we could make it work. As the Krishna was a battleship, we hardly used the cargo hold beyond picking up some loot, and it was almost never full.

Hey, cut that out! You're really gonna buy her, aren't you?! Okay, me: calm down and think carefully. I made her with my ideal appearance in mind, to the point that I even gave her half-rimmed glasses that she absolutely does not need.

The laundry finished while I anguished, so I got out of the bath and put my clothes back on. When I checked my handheld terminal, I had a message from Elma. They had finished their talk.

Fretting, I left the Krishna and headed to the lodge. *I hope we can settle this peacefully. Please, Milo, I've put all my trust into you! Though I guess if everything works out the way you want, I'll be buying a Maidroid…* I stopped my cyclical thoughts and focused on walking back to the lodge. Who even cared at this point?

***

When I arrived at the lodge, I put my ear up to the door. I heard no signs of arguing. Elma's message had said the conversation was done, so I steeled myself and walked in.

"Welcome back, Master."

"Y-yeah… Um?" I cocked my head at the spectacle inside.

"Heya," Elma said.

"Welcome back," said Chris.

"Welcome back. I'm sorry for what I did." Mimi bowed.

That was a good start. I was thrown off by how close the Maidroid was sitting to Mimi, though. “What’s going on…?” I asked.

“I explained my position sincerely and earnestly,” the Maidroid said.

“O-oh?” I looked to Elma in confusion. She responded with her usual shrug. *I’d like an actual explanation from someone, please!* I looked to Chris, but she just gave me an awkward grin. Their reactions were similar to the ones they’d had after our conversation about machine intelligence. Had the Maidroid tricked Mimi somehow? “What happened exactly?”

“The misunderstanding’s taken care of. All good, right?” Elma shrugged again.

“Sure, but I don’t feel like it’s totally cleared up.”

“Do you *need* every detail?”

“Ngh… I guess not.” I didn’t know how the conversation had gone, but Mimi seemed able to tolerate the Maidroid at least, which was all that mattered. How the Maidroid had achieved it wasn’t important. *AIs certainly have a way with words.* “I still haven’t decided whether I’m buying this custom Maidroid,” I said.

“You aren’t?”

“Were you not planning to?”

“Even if I did, we don’t have a room for her. The Krishna can only fit five people at most. We have one single room and two doubles, which Mimi and Elma are using.” Chris was staying in Mimi’s room, but she was a temporary visitor. We didn’t have an open room for a new crew member, unless either Mimi or Elma were okay with sharing.

The Maidroid cut in. “I feel no muscular fatigue or mental stress, and I have no metabolism. I take no issue with being left in my maintenance pod in the cargo hold. As long as I have a place for my clothing and equipment, I will be just fine.”

“That doesn’t sound too nice, though…”

“Master, I am a Maidroid, not an organic life-form. I appreciate your desire to treat me as one of the crew, and I wish to meet your expectations, but I do not need a living area meant for organics.”

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“Yes, it is.” The Maidroid nodded without hesitation.

I had no choice but to assent. *Shit, it’s starting to look like I’m buying her!* “L-Let’s see how this trial period goes!” I stammered. “We can talk about this more later, okay?”

“It’s not like you to be indecisive, Hiro.” Elma smirked.

“Look, this isn’t the same as buying something like a gravity sphere. We have to take this seriously.”

“Prudence is good,” Mimi said. “And we need to give her a name!”

“Mimi, why are you so into this now?”

Her change of attitude was dramatic, and I was still confused as to how it had happened. Had the Maidroid used promises of gourmet food to sway Mimi? Sworn to help her advance as an operator? Vowed to protect her using those advanced specs? Alternatively, maybe the Maidroid had said she wouldn’t get between Mimi and me. Or would that be too self-aware of her? In any case, the Maidroid had gotten Mimi to accept her. Once she had me whipped, it was all over.

Don’t think it’ll be that easy!

“I want to know why you set her up to be almost battle-ready,” Elma said to me. “Her specs are way too high.”

“I wanted her to be strong enough for bodyguard work. Stuff happens to us a lot, right? I figured Mimi could use a guard so she’ll be safe whenever she leaves the Krishna. Especially because I’m not much of a close-quarters fighter.”

Elma was clearly the best fighter in the crew. I figured I could hold my own in a shoot-out, but if we were brawling, I would get trounced.

“Uh-huh. What about her features?”

“Totally based on my interests,” I said outright. There was no point in trying to hide it. I would never dare say that my cool, raven-haired maid with flame-red, half-rimmed glasses was just picked at random. She could even swap her locks out for a long ponytail, totally changing her type in a flash! Awesome, right?!

“Is *this* what you’re into? Huh…” Elma looked the Maidroid up and down.

“Should I try to be like her?” Chris asked, looking her over as well. She had black hair and a cute face, so she wasn’t too far off, but Chris was Chris, and I wanted her to keep her individuality.

“Back in my homeland, most people have black hair like me and Chris,” I told them. “I could’ve picked something colorful, but I wanted it to be familiar. And the glasses are a kink of mine.”

“An android doesn’t need glasses, and I doubt she can use them as a wearable,” Elma mused.

“A…wearable?”

“Y’know, wearable devices like glasses with long-range optical zoom or analysis functions. Maidroids don’t need those, right?”

“Oh, yeah. True.” I was surprised to hear that was a thing, but indeed, the Maidroid wouldn’t need any of that as she had advanced sensors.

“If you buy her, you’d better take care of her. Though I guess she’ll be taking care of you.”

“I still haven’t decided if I’m going to buy her…” I muttered to myself as I looked over to the custom Maidroid, who was looking at Mimi’s tablet. *Yeah, she’s pretty. Good job, Hiro.* Regardless, it seemed like everyone would get along just fine now, so I might end up buying her. *How long is it gonna take to get that detached house with a yard if I keep splurging like this? Meh… Can’t put a price on safety, I guess…*

Being able to protect Mimi from danger would be a godsend on its own.

***

“Have we arranged our forces?”

“Yes, milord. The majority are lowly space pirates, but we have gathered 113 small craft, 21 medium craft, and 3 large craft. We have also placed thrusters on nearby asteroids in preparation for an orbital attack.”

“That should be enough bait. How about the main force?”

“We have filled two stealth dropships with battle robots. They are ready to deal with hacking attempts from the planet’s AI.”

“Hmm. You’ve pinpointed their location?”

“Yes, though it was quite difficult. Those mercenaries fancy themselves clever, and they have access to a small fortune.”

“But of course. I was shocked that they defeated their pursuers. I was promised they could handle a gold rank. Disappointing after all the pirates’ clamoring for reward money.”

“They were supposed to be strong, but perhaps the mercenary was simply stronger. Being designated gold rank is not necessarily an indicator of his strength.”

“Hmph. I don’t like it. We need to take the mercenary out of his ship. It may have some value, so do what you can to preserve it. But kill the merc.”

“Yes, milord. We’ve already arranged a landing spot. This will be done swiftly.”

“If we don’t finish him here, we will not have another chance. Christina, I bear no ill will toward you, but you must die.”

Chapter 9:
Pursuers Continue to Pursue

TODAY WAS LOVELY. The sky wasn't perfectly clear, but the clouds were fluffy and white, with no sign of rain in sight. Yep, it was the perfect day for rock fishing.

"Wh-whoa?! I-I think I have a bite!" Mimi began to panic, fishing rod in hand. It seemed she had the first nibble of the day.

"Calmly reel it in. The line won't break that easily, right?"

"Correct. It is made to withstand up to 500 kilograms, so you have no need to worry," the custom Maidroid said, backing me up. The lines looked normal, but they were super strong. *What is this, metal wire?*

"W-wow, look! There it is! What should I do?!" Mimi nimbly reeled in a fish I'd never seen before.

At the very least, it didn't have legs or the upper body of a cat… I shuddered. *Thank God.*

"Leave it to me." The custom Maidroid swiftly approached the floundering fish and put it into a bucket of seawater. The fish was black and reminded me of sea bream. It would be good boiled or cut into sashimi.

"Mei, thank you!" Mimi said.

"Do not mention it." Mei bowed.

Three days had passed since she had shown up. Mimi had complained that "custom Maidroid" was too much to say every time, and after some discussion with Elma and Chris, they all decided to name her Mei. Anyone could tell you that giving something a name makes you love it all the more, but I couldn't complain now. Despite growling and being mean when they first met, Mimi had taken to the Maidroid, and even Elma seemed sweeter to her as well. *What kind of negotiation tactics did she use, I wonder?*

Chris had remained totally neutral to her the whole time, but she was probably used to servants.

“Oh! I’ve got one too,” Elma said.

“You’ve got this, Elma!” Chris, who was spectating, cheered her on. She was too small for a rod and wasn’t fond of live fish anyway.

And me? Hell yeah, I’m fishing. I’m just not even getting a nibble! Why is that?

Suddenly, Mei looked up into the sky.

I followed her gaze, but only saw the usual. *What’s going on?*

“There is an emergency at hand. Everyone, evacuate!”

“Bwuh?” I was confused, but I doubted Mei would joke about something so serious, so I acted swiftly. “Leave everything behind and get to the Krishna, now!”

“Huh?” Mimi gasped. “Oh, okay!”

Elma reacted quickly. “Gotcha. Everyone, hurry!”

“Yes, sir!”

The girls threw their rods aside. I did the same and reached for my holstered laser gun. *Good thing I brought it just in case.* Elma had a hand on her gun too. Mimi hadn’t brought a weapon, but I was worried about her misfiring, so that was okay.

“What’s the emergency?” I asked Mei as we ran.

I kept my laser gun in hand to be prepared for the worst, ready to undo the safety at any time.

“It is a large-scale pirate attack,” said Mei. She spoke evenly and with perfect clarity despite sprinting—I mean, she *was* a machine—and explained the circumstances as calmly as possible. “There are over a hundred ships. I have confirmed large craft among them. They also have asteroids with thrusters attached to attack the planet.”

“Whoa.” I shivered. “You didn’t notice that asteroid thing before?” I asked Elma.

“I don’t know how they did it, but they did it well,” she answered. “They must have fitted the asteroids with FTL drives and shields and brought them along.”

“Would they do something that expensive?”

“If they have a wealthy patron to foot the bill, then why not?”

A wealthy patron, huh? This is Chris’s uncle’s doing, then.

“The space pirates are attacking our orbital defense platform,” the Maidroid continued. “The meteorite attack is headed for the Accumulation and Assembly Site on the equator, so there is no direct danger to us—no, something is descending now.”

I followed Mei’s gaze again and saw a bunch of fireballs coming this way at jaw-dropping speed. Laser cannons jutted out of the sea and attacked, but there were too many. Even the mountain we had climbed the other day had lasers flying from it, but some fireballs got through and smashed into the island. None were landing near us, but the impacts shook the ground. They must’ve hit somewhere around the lodge.

“Looks like they weren’t reactive munitions,” I said.

“Stop! You’re gonna jinx us!” Elma groaned, utterly annoyed.

If those had been reactive missiles or cannonballs instead of fireballs, the island would’ve been blown away. The silver lining was that we weren’t in the lodge, where we would have died on impact.

“What’s with the fireballs?”

“Investigating…” Mei paused. “Movement confirmed. They are battle robots.”

“Eugh.”

“Wow…”

Elma and I both groaned at once. Battle robots were as varied as could be, but the best of them were impossible for humans to take down one on one. They were tough, accurate, and skilled in multiple forms of combat. I could fight them with my power armor on, but not without it. I hoped they weren’t the worst kind, but I doubted Chris’s uncle would take it easy on us.

“The island’s defensive forces are fighting them,” Mei announced. “Hide yourselves—a second wave is coming.”

“There they are!” I cried.

As we left the rocks and emerged on the beach, more fireballs came flying from another direction. Counter-lasers were fired, but the sheer amount of fireballs made it impossible to stop them all. One of them came toward us.

“Gah, here it comes. Everyone, get down!”

“Eep?!”

I grabbed Mimi and dove onto the sand. Elma and Mei covered Chris.

The fireball landed between the lodge and beach with an earthshaking boom. It sprayed pebbles and sand everywhere—or at least, it felt that way.

Once the shaking subsided, I looked up and saw a strange stake stabbed into the ground. It had hemispherical protrusions that were melting under laser fire. I’d never seen anything like it before. Now that the laser had glanced off of it, the protrusions were mostly melted.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked.

“I-I think so?” Mimi said.

“I don’t think I’m hurt,” Elma added.

Chris said, “I believe I’m okay too.”

“Okay, let’s get to the Krishna—”

“Wait… Hiro, shoot!” Elma readied her laser gun as the hemispherical protrusions fell off of the stake, revealing spheres.

Spheres, eh? I see…

As the spherical things began to change shape, I pointed my laser gun and fired away—at maximum power, of course. Elma fired mercilessly as well, and we destroyed the things before they could finish transforming.

What? It's cowardly to shoot an enemy during their transformation? Who cares?!

"Was that a battle robot?"

"Probably," Elma answered. "Are the others malfunctioning? It's a good thing our lasers were enough to take that one down."

"For sure." If our handheld laser guns hadn't been able to hurt it, we would have been done for. But it took twenty shots between us to kill it, so they had good resistance. We'd have to be careful. "Let's check ourselves for injuries and then rush to the Krishna," I said, firing off my laser gun at the remaining hemisphere to finish it off. I swapped out the empty energy pack for a full one. "Elma, how many energy packs you got?"

"Two. You?"

"Four for me. Want one?"

"I'm fine. I think it's better if you have more ammo." Elma shook her head and finished reloading.

I could fire faster than her, so that made sense. "Sure thing. Mimi, Chris, Mei! Let's go!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Understood."

"Very well. Both of you, stay behind me." Mei stood to cover Mimi and Chris, who couldn't fight. If her body was made to my specifications, then she could easily make it to the ship. But maybe I'd asked for too much.

Watching our surroundings, we headed to the Krishna. Battle robots continued to fall from the sky. I hoped the island's defense systems could take care of us.

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Hey! It's your boy again, Captain Hiro.

After obliterating the battle robot that landed on the beach, we made it to the lodge. However, it was in a tragic state. The windows were

shattered from the earlier quakes, and stray bullets—lasers?—had burned and destroyed the walls. Despite the sorry state it was in, it would be helpful enough as cover, so we hid ourselves beside it.

What? Shouldn't we be heading to the Krishna? Well, yes. If only we could.

"I don't see us getting in there…" Elma muttered.

"We would die," Mimi agreed.

"It's suicidal," Chris said.

"Yes. It is beyond dangerous."

As we hid in the shrubbery next to the lodge, an intense battle unfolded before us: the island's defense system versus battle robots unfolding from their spherical form.

The bottom halves of the enemy robots each divided into three legs, and the upper bodies sprouted four arms, each shooting lasers. Quite the powerful machines.

Meanwhile, the island's…unique defense forces advanced. There were coconut crabs like two-meter boulders, mechanical gorillas and dogs, laser turrets emerging from the ground, Maidroids with laser rifles… *Oh, the gorilla just charged in and destroyed some enemy robots. Monkey strong.*

"Seriously, Chris. Your uncle can't do all this and still avoid the authorities, right?"

"I dunno," Elma answered instead. "They might be avoiding tracking somehow. They could pay the pirates using Rare Metal alone instead of Ener, and they might even get their battle robots under the table. That could be the reason they didn't use reactive weapons."

"Why, though?" Mimi asked.

"The Empire wouldn't sit by and let anyone throw reactive weapons at a resort planet. A thorough investigation might catch them, so they're fighting the hardest they can while still protecting themselves."

"Is the Empire that wary of reactive weapons?" I wondered aloud. "Awfully lax on regulating them, if so."

I'd used anti-ship torpedoes with reactive warheads on the Belbellum Federation back during the skirmish, but I was able to resupply them with minor difficulties.

"There aren't *that* many mercs, after all. They're keeping an eye on you, don't worry."

"Really? Maybe so." If they regulated weapons, they might as well regulate ships, since they could attack stations and colonies. I was suddenly curious as to how mercenaries had become such an accepted part of this universe.

"Master Hiro, is the Krishna okay?" Mimi asked, worried.

I'd be worried about that too.

"It is," I assured her. "I activated the shields remotely using my tablet, so it should be fine. Maybe I should've had Elma stay back in the ship, though."

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty. We never could've expected them to break through the planet's defenses and attack us directly," Elma said.

Mei stooped forward, bowing in the brush. "I am deeply sorry for my inability to keep you all safe."

"Eh, it's more our fault for bringing trouble to you." I shrugged. *Are we gonna be on the hook to pay for the damages? Ugh…* "For now, let's handle covering fire. Keep yourselves hidden."

I poked my upper half out of the shrub, readied my laser gun, and held my breath. Time seemed to slow down around me. I set the sight of my laser on the enemy robots and fired away. Though everything else was slow, my lasers still moved at almost the speed of light. One, two, three, four, five shots landed by the time the robot's arms pointed my way.

"Hmph!" I fired twice at one of its barrels. My lasers caused an explosion inside its arm, blowing half of it away.

Wow. So those barrels are weak points, huh?

I needed to breathe, so I hid again and gasped. "Haah! Haah, haah…"

"Master Hiro…"

"I'm fine."

After recovering, I leaned out the side of the shrub and held my breath again, firing aggressively at the robots' weapon arms. Once I trimmed their offense, the defense forces would be able to finish them off.

I shot two lasers at each barrel, lowering the enemy robots' firepower. Seeing that they were weakened, our defense robots began a fierce counterattack. The ones resembling coconut crabs closed in with incredible speed, slapping, smashing, and cutting the enemy with their scary pincers. The gorilla robots tackled foes, beating, beating, and *beating* them with their arms. Robotic hunting dogs crowded around the enemies, biting down and exploding. *What? Exploding?! Are they suicide-bomber weapons?! That's insane!*

Once the offense was broken, it was all over. Enemy robots were quickly disposed of, and the skirmish was over.

"Hounds are searching for enemies now," Mei told us. "Please wait until I have ensured our safety."

"Okay."

The surviving hunting dogs scattered in all directions. They were skeletal in nature, holding no more parts than necessary. The self-destructing devices were too scary for me.

It seemed the crabs and gorillas were guarding us. The crabs' shells appeared to be made of rock. What strange machines. The gorilla robots' fur was singed, showing the metal underneath. They must've taken laser fire. Were they camouflaged as real gorillas in the forest? Why? *Oh, they must be managing the forest. What about the crabs, though? Are they trimming trees or something? This island is just full of mysteries.*

After a while, we got the all-clear and headed to the Krishna. The Maidroids, crabs, and gorillas followed us as guards. I liked the crabs the most. They were huge. Like, big enough that I had to look up at them. I wanted to ride one so bad.

"I'm glad we were able to get to the Krishna," I sighed. Mimi, Elma, Chris, Mei, and I climbed up the ladder and boarded the ship.

"Agreed," said Mimi. "What a relief."

“Sorry I dragged you all into this…” Chris slumped down dejectedly. This was really getting to her.

“You don’t have to worry about it, okay?” Elma shrugged. “We’re not protecting you out of the goodness of our hearts, anyway.”

“Wow, Elma. Be a little nicer.”

Elma glared at me angrily.

That ain’t gonna work! I know you’re just being mean to uphold your mercenary dignity! You’re cute, though, like a child trying desperately to look tall by standing on their tiptoes.

“What do we do now?” Mimi asked.

“That’s a tough question, babe. I doubt we can get away easily while the pirates are having it out with the defense system, right?”

“Don’t even try it,” Elma said. “We should hole up in the Krishna until this all calms down. If we have to, we can find a way to leave.”

Elma was referring to the scenario in which Cierra III’s defensive platform failed and those space pirates started rampaging through the planet. Alternatively, their meteorite attack might hit the material storage facility and put the planet itself in danger.

“How are things looking?” I asked Mei.

“It is not going well,” she answered, tone grim. “We have requested emergency aid from the Imperial Fleet, but the enemy is blocking our communications, so we have yet to receive a response. Furthermore, small pirate craft have begun descending on the planet, while their large craft are performing orbital bombardment on our ground-based interception facilities.”

“Whoa, that’s really not good. Mimi and Elma, be ready to launch at a moment’s notice.”

“Gotcha,” Elma replied. “What about Chris?”

“Hmm… Mei, can you support operations?”

“Yes. I have the necessary assets installed.”

“Then sit in the sub-operator’s chair. Chris, we have a spare seat; you can sit there.”

“Yes, sir.”

We rehydrated and chatted a bit before heading to the cockpit. Even the Krishna wouldn’t survive orbital fire from a large craft, so we needed to be ready.

Just as we reached the cockpit, the Krishna shook. Or rather, the ground below it shook.

“Whoa!” I cried.

“Eep?!” Chris squeaked.

“Their orbital fire is coming closer to this island,” Mei informed us. “Their small craft are beginning to gather as well.”

“It seems my uncle bankrolled this, after all.”

“We guessed that already. Let’s get this ship on the road!” Elma demanded.

“Right. Mimi, get Chris to the spare seat.”

“Okay!”

Mimi took care of Chris while Elma and I jumped into our seats.

“I’m gonna launch,” I told Elma. “Take care of the checks while I do.”

“Understood. Shifting main generator from standby to battle mode.”

“Sorry for the wait!” Mimi ran back to her chair.

“Okay. Time for liftoff!” After confirming Mimi was in her seat, I lifted the ship directly upward. The thrusters that handled attitude control in space worked as vertical liftoff thrusters while on the surface. “Mimi, stay focused on the radar. That goes double for anything that comes in from outer space.”

“Such as orbital bombardment?”

“Nah. Any pirates who come for us will be coming from above. Based on what Mei said, they’ll be flooding in. Though yeah, we do want to avoid bombardment.”

I didn’t expect anything to be able to hit us directly, as the Krishna was agile, and orbital bombardments typically used kinetic weapons meant

to target buildings rather than ships. However, that didn't mean they weren't going to use lasers. Super-high-output lasers like the Krishna's heavy lasers wouldn't attenuate much in the atmosphere, so a cruiser with equal power would easily be able to attack us from orbit with a laser cannon.

But I didn't think space pirate equipment would be that dangerous. As long as they didn't have the fleet's cruisers, anyway.

"Hiro, do you have experience fighting in gravity?" Elma asked.

"Not really, but it's not my first time."

"Hmm. Don't do anything too dangerous, okay?"

"I can't make any promises." The space pirates wouldn't be used to fighting in gravity either, and I would be a fool not to take advantage of that.

"There are several enemies at ten o'clock, coming in at a high altitude!" Mimi informed me.

"They waste no time, huh? Elma, you take care of subsystems."

"Aye-aye."

I blasted the main thrusters, ascending rapidly. The g-forces of our acceleration were more intense than usual, probably due to the planet's gravity and atmosphere.

"Huff, huff…!" Chris hyperventilated behind me, but I couldn't take care of her during a battle.

"They're coming!" Mimi screamed.

"Initiative wins the day!" I turned the ship to the approaching pirates and fired all four of my heavy lasers at them as they charged into the atmosphere.

"Wargh?! A-an ambush?!" Unfortunately for him, the pirate at the front exploded from only one volley. Given how big the explosion was, he was dead meat.

"There's more!" Mimi said.

"Enemy ships are taking evasive maneuvers!" Elma added.

“I’ll grind ’em down as best I can.”

I single-mindedly fought off the descending pirate ships. They weren’t *total* idiots. Once they knew the Krishna was waiting, they changed course and tried to evade my attacks. However, they were coming in at ballistic trajectory, and changing their angle so suddenly would be dangerous.

“Idiots! Don’t change your angle, or you’ll mess up your landing!” an enemy said over the comm.

“I’m not gonna dive into that cannon fire just to die! How about you go in there?!” one of his buddies snapped back.

Elma chuckled. “That’s an awful fight they’re having.”

“Shame they’re all gonna die either way.” I wasn’t going to let a single one get away, and Milo wasn’t about to let them stomp all over its planet.

“Cannon fire is coming from beyond orbit!” Mimi told me.

“Whoops.”

While I fought off the sporadic pirate charges, the enemy’s large craft started bombarding us with kinetic weapons from orbit. They were easy to dodge if you knew they were coming, and even if they hit, I figured they wouldn’t break my shields. Still, there was always a chance they would blow away the shields and fling us into the ocean, so I was forced to start dodging.

“This does make it harder to fight back…”

“There is no other way. We do not want to get hit.”

Elma and Mei were cool-headed, but once I started avoiding the orbital bombardment, Mimi and Chris went quiet. Were they petrified? Shaking? I couldn’t look around in the middle of battle.

“E-excuse me,” Mimi stammered. “The enemies who landed are starting to gather and come this way.”

“Where’s the closest one?” I asked.

“The first one we’ll run into is ahead of the starboard bow, but they’ll come from all directions, one after another.”

“Gotcha. Our first priority is dealing with the ones coming right at us.”

More pirates continued to approach at ballistic trajectory. Dealing with the ones who veered off would have to wait.

“We’ve definitely got our pick of them,” Elma said, satisfied by the bounty before us.

“Yeah. Shame their bounties all kinda suck individually, though.”

“Y-you two are awfully composed…” Chris shuddered.

“This bombardment isn’t bad. I’ll take it over flying around in an asteroid belt any day.”

“Totally,” Elma agreed.

“Come to think of it, I would too,” Mimi said.

“Umm…?” Chris seemed much less convinced.

It’s true, though. Kinetic orbital bombardment was dangerous and all, but it was only coming from *three* ships. Weaving through an asteroid belt would be far more difficult and dangerous.

Pirates swarmed in from all directions, dodging my attacks. They screamed through the wide-range communications as they all closed in.

“Dammit! Shoot him down, already!”

“That incentive bonus is gonna be mine!”

“Jeez,” I said with a chuckle. “An incentive bonus?”

“How much did they pay for this?” Elma groaned. “Deploying chaff!”

“I dunno, but seeing as they keep coming no matter how many I swat down, it must be a lot.” I accelerated hard, taking their attacks with my shields before rocketing up to a higher altitude.

More pirates screamed through the comms.

“They’re running! Catch ’em!”

“Toss some heat-seeking missiles at ’em!”

A shrill alarm went off as seeker missiles approached the Krishna from behind.

“Elma. On my signal, engage emergency cooling and deploy flares.”

“Aye-aye. You wanna do it when we go into the clouds, right?”

“Exactly… Now!”

The Krishna plunged into a thick cloud, and Elma activated the ship’s emergency cooling at the same time she launched flares. Having lost their targeted heat source, the seeker missiles closed in on the flares and exploded behind us.

“Did we get ’em?!” one pirate yelled.

No, idiot, I wanted to say, but I held my tongue and flew through the cloud, using my attitude control thrusters to turn the ship along the way and keep it hidden. Now, the Krishna was flying backward.

“You’re pretty good under gravity,” Elma said.

“Spaceships aren’t designed with aerodynamics in mind, but as long as I’m careful, it’s not too bad.” The feel of a ship changed a lot based on air resistance and gravity, so if you didn’t pay attention, you could slam into the ground or the ocean.

“We didn’t get ’em!” one pirate bellowed, mad that I’d gotten away.

“Then I’ve still got a chance!”

Pirates burst through the clouds in pursuit, but I showered them with heavy laser fire.

“Don’t leave the clouds! He’ll shoot you!”

“Gah?! Don’t just stop either! He knows you’re there anyway!”

Oh? Looks like some of these pirates have actual brains. I couldn’t see their ships with photosensors, but my other sensors made it all too clear where they were. Even heavy lasers would attenuate a little inside the clouds, but as long as I kept shooting, I could make up for—

Fyoom! Kinetic bombardment from orbit pierced through all the crowding pirates, blowing them and the clouds away. *Holy crap, are you kidding me?!*

“Nooo!” I screamed. “My bounties!”

“What?! That’s what you’re worried about?!” Chris sounded appalled for some reason, but I didn’t have it in me to care.

I hadn’t thought the pirates were stupid enough to get hit by orbital bombardment. *I have to finish them off before more of them die!*

“Hiro, don’t get greedy and do something stupid,” Elma warned me.

“Don’t tell me what I already know. I’m not that dumb.” I cleanly took down each pirate ship in quick succession while they panicked at the sudden turn of events. The bombardment continued, so I had to watch for anything falling from above.

“He’s certainly overpowering them,” Chris commented.

“He would never lose to pirates,” Mimi said proudly.

The situation was shifting from a counterstrike to cleanup work. The pirates had lost their chain of command thanks to the orbital strike, so now, they were just charging around like maniacs, trying to hit me, or colliding with one another in their panic. Some were even shooting heat-seeking missiles too close to their allies and taking them out. *That’s what happens when you use them too close to your pals, dummy! They literally seek out heat!* There was no way for us to lose.

“Are we not going to deal with the enemies bombarding us from orbit?” Chris asked.

I smirked. “Oh, those little guys? You have to maintain a specific orbit to keep yourself out of the planet’s gravitational pull, so if we go too close, it’d be *really* easy for them to bombard us.”

“Basically, you don’t want the high ground here,” Elma summarized. “But can’t the Krishna’s heavy lasers fight back?”

“They’re strong, but they don’t exactly reach far. My ship isn’t really suited for long-range attacks.” My lasers had high output, but the oscillator was just too small for long-ranged fighting. Maybe it could work as a last-ditch effort, but I hoped it wouldn’t come to that. “I’d prefer if Milo could deal with the big guys for us… Mei, how’s it looking?”

Mei answered calmly from the sub-operator’s seat. “Our Accumulation and Assembly Site on the equator will soon begin mass

driver–powered attacks. We have also successfully nullified their jamming device. The Imperial Fleet stationed in this system are heading this way."

It would be perfect if Milo could take down the large craft using the mass driver. And even if not, the fleet would be here soon enough. *I guess we just have to smack down the rest of the little guys.*

"Mass driver bombardment has begun," Mei announced. "Striking in five, four, three, two, one…now." At the end of her countdown, I saw a flash of light in the distance. "Direct hit confirmed. Second and third shots incoming…and striking."

Pow pow! Two more flashes of light. The mass driver's fire must have sunk all three of the large ships. *Seriously—they all went down with one hit and they couldn't even dodge it? Note to self: Do not underestimate the mass driver.*

"Well, let's just clean up the garbage—" I started but was interrupted.

"I will deal with them as well."

"Something is coming at us at ballistic trajectory!" Mimi yelled.

Enemy reinforcements?! I tensed up for a moment, but then I realized they were likely on our side. "They must be reinforcements from Milo, right?" I asked Mei.

"Yes. Less reinforcements and more of an attack, however."

"An attack?" I repeated, just as something exploded above us.

"Waaaargh?!"

"Wh-what's going on?!"

"O-our shields!"

Whatever it was had taken out the pirates' ships but left the Krishna untouched.

"That was a smart bomb," Mei explained. "Milo directly controls the bombs' trajectory and time of explosion."

Supermassive, rapid-fire smart bombs exploded all around, stripping pirate ships of their shields and blowing them to smithereens. Those were dangerous weapons. Even the Krishna would be in danger if I wasn't careful. While I shuddered in terror, a wide-field communication came in.

“This is the Imperial Fleet’s Pirate Hunting Unit. Cease all hostilities at once. By the name of His Imperial Majesty, we will permit no more violence.”

I guess the cavalry has arrived, but wait— “The Pirate Hunting Unit…” I repeated.

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Mimi shuddered.

“Did she come here just to chase you, Hiro? She’s tenacious, I’ll give her that.”

“Um?” Chris alone seemed confused as we all shivered at what was to come.

***

“Achoo!”

“Lieutenant Commander, are you sick?”

“No, I’m perfectly fine. That sneeze caught me rather off guard. Why do I feel as though I’m being slandered right now…?”

“Maybe you need a check-up.”

“Hmm, perhaps. My, I didn’t expect this to come up so soon. This is a good opportunity, so let us be as thorough as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Chapter 10:
Our Vacation Ends

THE SUN BEGAN TO SET, and the sky turned from blue to purple. Many shooting stars were visible in the distance.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" Mimi cried.

"Yeah." I chuckled. "But I think they're all chunks of pirate ships."

"Yep. Beautiful filth." Elma nodded.

"Don't you two see any romance in this situation?"

"C'mon, those are all bad guys. Where's the romance in that?"

"We can't be too sure that they're all bad guys," Mimi insisted. "What if they're bad ladies, or bad boys? Or even bad girls?"

"That's what you're concerned about?"

Regardless, I couldn't enjoy the sight, knowing it was made up of destroyed ships. Though, yes, it was a pretty nice-looking shower of lights.

Let's forget about the lame shooting stars and recap the situation so far.

We'd managed to get through the battle robots and onto the Krishna, then lifted off to evade orbital bombardment. After that, we'd slipped through constant kinetic bombardment and had a big fight with all the space pirates, and Milo's ginormous mass-driver bombs had finished them off. The Imperial Fleet's Pirate Hunting Unit had arrived when the pirates were already dead. While they did the final cleanup work, we'd ended up on standby and decided to come back to our resort island.

We also had Mei get off the ship for a while. Never know when you might have to take flight, y'know? It would be abduction—er, theft?—if we took her with us off-planet.

By the time we got back to our ruined lodge, the gorillas and crab robots had already gone back to the forest. *Dang; I wanted to ride a giant crab.*

Now it was evening, and we were enjoying dinner and a movie. We were eating pizza made by the Steel Chef 5. It came with a surprising range of toppings, including my favorite: teriyaki chicken. The salty-sweet meat and sauce fit the pizza very well, and the ginger ale complemented it perfectly.

"So, now what?" Elma asked. "Do we contact Serena?"

"Ugh. I guess it would be safer, yeah."

We had been hiding on this planet for a week. Hopefully, Chris's grandfather had received her message by now and was working to save her life. At the same time, that meant a fire was lit under her uncle. But it was too late; hell, you could say he'd lost everything by now. What would a man do when he had nothing left to lose? He wasn't the kind of guy to give up and accept his punishment, so it was possible he would chase her to the bitter end.

"She does owe you a lot," Mimi agreed. "Why don't we have her protect us?"

"Wow, Mimi. Now you've got the mercenary spirit."

"But of course! I'm growing every day." She puffed out her chest, proud to be seen as one of the mercs.

Mmm, those boobs are just as nice as ever. Are they growing every day too? Inquiring minds want to know.

"What kind of person is this Serena?" Chris inquired.

"I'd say…a disappointing beauty," I said.

"Disappointing?"

"A drunkard too," Elma added.

"A…drunkard."

"Erm, she's a lieutenant commander who leads the Empire's Pirate Hunting Unit," Mimi explained. "She, um…has some feelings for Hiro."

"Persistent, perhaps," I added.

"You mean a stalker," Elma said bluntly.

“A persistent stalker. Are you in danger?” Chris looked very uncomfortable.

Not at all, my dear.

“Yeah, er…” I scratched my head. “I think she’s some noble’s daughter. Who was it again?”

“She is Marquess Holz’s daughter,” Mimi answered.

“Marquess Holz. Their family has put out many military cabinet members and high-ranking leaders. Though our family has communicated little with them.”

“Oh, yeah. What do you think, Chris? Should we ask the fleet for help?”

“Hmm, I think so. With things as they are, anything that would make us safer…”

“You won’t have to worry about using your position this time, Chris,” Elma chimed in. “Hiro’s going to make use of a very *useful* connection.”

“Is that true?”

“For suuure.” Elma flashed an evil grin. “Besides, we don’t wanna let that lady use *us* every time. Sometimes, we gotta use her instead.”

You’re saying we make Serena do all the work if we get attacked, right? That’s a pretty good idea. She’s caused us all sorts of trouble; it’s about time we returned the favor.

“Cool. Let’s contact Serena, then.”

“Shouldn’t we talk with Milo first?” Elma asked.

“Oh, okay. Mimi, can you do that?”

“Yes, sir.” Mimi called Milo on her tablet.

It picked up and asked, “Yes. Do you require anything?”

“The lodge is destroyed, so it’s not much of a place to stay anymore,” I explained. “And we have a useful connection coming down, so we were thinking of leaving. Is there anything we need to do first?”

“You still have time remaining in your stay, but once you leave Cierra III, your remaining stay will be canceled. As it was our failure that caused

you trouble, and as the lodge is not in a suitable state to stay in, I would like to give you a coupon with a major discount for your next stay."

"Sounds good to me! It was fun. We should come back sometime."

"I agree! The food was lovely!"

Elma and Mimi seemed excited by the prospect. Likewise, I was already looking forward to the next time I could drink some real soda.

"By the way, have you put any thought into purchasing your Maidroid?" Milo prodded.

"Huh? H-hmm…"

"Master Hiro, are you really going to leave Mei behind?" Mimi stared at me as I clammed up.

Stop! Don't look at me like that!

"Aw, don't be a stick in the mud," Elma said, rolling her eyes. "It'll be a relief to have Mei with us, especially with the specs you chose." She was oddly optimistic about buying Mei.

"True…"

"Why the long face?"

"Guys have issues, okay?"

For real, just imagine having these girls you really like, and you're just parading your favorite, life-sized figure—someone who exemplifies all of your kinks—in front of them. Except the figure can walk, talk, and devote itself wholly to you. Is that embarrassing or what?

But I get it. I get it, okay? It was too late now that it was all out in the open. And y'know what, I kinda agreed. But I *made* Mei, from top to bottom. Why shouldn't I be embarrassed? The only good thing was that they seemed to accept her.

"True," I said, giving up. "Having Mei around would be a big help. How does a purchase work?" I asked Milo.

"First off, thank you for your purchase. You are free to take Mei with you as she is. All required information is with Oriental Industries, so please be sure to visit their dealership at your convenience. The testing data will be included free of charge."

“Gotcha.”

“She will lose my processing support, so until you upgrade her, be aware that her functions will be somewhat limited.”

“Huh. We’ll have to get her upgraded fast, then.”

With that, Mei was set to come aboard. The purchase went through awfully fast too; my Ener went through the network, and it was over.

“I will be in your care from now on. I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” Mei said with a lovely bow.

“Same to you.”

“We’re going to have a great time together, Mei!” Mimi squealed.

“Good to have ya. We’re gonna make you work, though.” Elma smirked.

“Yes.” Mei lifted her head and stepped toward me. “I will serve you forever, Master.”

“C-cool?”

The black eyes peeking out from behind her red-rimmed glasses had an awful pressure to them, eliciting only a nervous nod from me.

***

“Achoo! Haa-choo!”

“Lieutenant Commander, are you certain that you don’t have a cold?”

“How strange. My early morning medical check showed no issues.”

“Lieutenant Commander! Communications are coming from an unidentified ship leaving Cierra III!”

“An unidentified ship?”

“Yes. Checking the model now… Oh!”

“Hm?”

“A report: I have identified the ship’s affiliation. It is the Krishna, piloted by gold-rank mercenary Captain Hiro.”

“Huh…? What?!”

***

A short while after we opened communications to the Pirate Hunting Unit, a very familiar face came on screen.

“It’s been a while, Captain Hiro,” Serena said.

“That it has, Lieutenant Commander Serena. Glad to see you’re in good health.”

“Yes, good enough. Quite a shame that all this happened during your vacation, no?” Serena smiled, but I could practically feel the dark aura emanating from her. Her expression seemed to say, *Serves you right to have your vacation interrupted!*

“Ha ha ha! Well, for *some* reason, the Imperial Fleet took too long to get here and protect the Empire’s assets, so I’ve got to make some extra money. It was just a week, but I think I enjoyed the vacation more than enough. Aaah, Cierra III’s resort was just lovely. Delicious food, gorgeous ocean…”

“I see. Good for you. Hee hee…” Upon my prodding, the dark aura permeating Serena’s smile only thickened. *Ooh, scary.*

“Ha ha ha! Anyway, Lieutenant Commander…”

“Yes, Captain Hiro?”

“Remember how you kinda owe me one?”

Serena’s smile warped into a grimace.

Ha ha ha! That’s the spirit.

***

We landed in the hangar of the flagship of the Pirate Hunting Unit, Lestarius, and some soldiers guided us to the captain's quarters.

We didn't really need it, as I had been here millions of times during my teaching duty. Mimi and Elma had visited a few times as well, but as this was probably an important job to the soldiers, I shut up and let them handle it.

For Chris, however, this seemed to be a very rare opportunity. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity as they roamed over the ship's metal interior, and she held on to Mimi's hand to keep from falling and getting hurt or wandering off. It was a heartwarming sight.

Mei was back at the Krishna. Nobody on the Lestarius was likely to mess with our ship, but you might as well be careful, right?

"Lieutenant Commander, I've brought Captain Hiro's party," one soldier said when we arrived.

We then heard Serena's voice from the other side. "Thank you. You may return to your post."

"It shall be done." He bowed to her despite the door between them and left.

These military guys sure do stick to the rules, I thought to myself as the door opened.

"Come on in," Serena said, and we all obeyed.

The room was surprisingly neat. There was one desk, a little drawing room area, some cupboards along the walls decorated with crests and shields, and a few swords. *Swords are cool. I want one, even if I'd never actually use it.*

"Thank you for responding to our request," I began. "I hate for us mercenaries to take time out of your busy schedule."

"Please, enough with the act," she groaned, disgusted. "I'm getting goosebumps. The bad kind."

"Really? Cool, then I'll just talk like usual."

"Ugh… Yes, that will do. So, what's the problem now? If you're here to brag about your resort vacation, then I'm very glad to cut you down

where you stand."

"Eww, no. Too scary. I'm actually here for serious talk. Don't you think it's suspicious how all those pirates came to attack Cierra III?"

Serena narrowed her crimson eyes. It seemed she did think it suspicious.

"And let's ignore the scale for a second," I continued. "They attached FTL drives and thrusters to asteroids to attack from orbit. That can't be easy or cheap, right? Wouldn't you think there's someone behind it? Well, we have an idea of who that might be."

"How interesting. I would love to hear your thoughts, but first, what are you after?"

"Aww, all I want is a week or two of help. I'd like to get supplies through the Empire too."

"So that's your aim. Are you planning to use us as a shield?"

"That's a mean way of putting it. I just want you to help us fight the big baddie, that's all. For a limited time."

"I suppose that makes sense… Go on?"

She clearly wanted to know what was up. I wondered where to begin. "Should I just tell her everything?" I asked the girls.

Elma nodded. "That would be best, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Let's start by telling her about Chris," Mimi said.

We all turned to look at Chris. Serena followed suit, causing the girl to fidget uncomfortably. *Starting from the very beginning would be best, I guess.*

"First, as soon as we came to this star system, pirates attacked us. They canceled our FTL using an interdictor, but we took them down."

"You do attract quite the shocking amount of trouble. And then?"

"We found a cold-sleep pod among the wreckage. Chris here was inside. Her full name is Christina Dalenwald; she's a member of the Dalenwald family and the granddaughter of the current count."

“Count Dalenwald… I did hear a few months ago of his heir being killed in a pirate attack. So she’s a survivor. What’s the meaning of this?”

“Apparently, it was an inheritance dispute disguised as a pirate attack. They found out Chris survived, so the dispute is flaring up again. This pirate attack was planned by her uncle, the same as the first. His name was, uh…what?”

“It’s Balthazar Dalenwald,” Mimi whispered.

“Oh, that’s right. We think it’s Balthazar’s doing. He even sent battle robots down to our island.”

“Hmm. I think I need to hear more.”

Tired of standing and talking, we went to the drawing room area to sit and told her about everything that had happened so far, including the battle. Mei had received data from Milo regarding the battle robots—and what appeared to be a stealth dropship—and sent it to Mimi’s tablet, which Mimi then shared with Serena.

“I’ve only skimmed it so far, but goodness… I don’t like the look of this.” Serena frowned deeply as she looked it over.

“You mean the stealth dropship, right?”

“Yes. Typically, only the military should have access to such technology. How did they procure it, I wonder?” The battle robots were high-grade, but apparently not too hard for rich nobility to get their hands on. If they had been military grade, we probably wouldn’t have made it through them as easily as we had. “I can see that we—the military, that is—can’t ignore this situation. This Balthazar is sure to attempt some last-resort attack. I imagine you want to use my unit as protection?”

“More or less, yeah,” I said.

“You admitted that quite readily…”

“I don’t like to dance around the truth. I’m an honest man, after all. Besides, this wouldn’t be hard to handle for you, would it?”

“Ugh… Very well. It will be expensive, though.”

“Expensive? But aren’t you just repaying your debt to me?” I smiled.

“Gnngh…” Serena looked at me, frustrated and trembling. *Ha ha ha! This is just lovely.*

“Think about it this way. You do your usual work, and your debt to me just vanishes! Awesome, right?”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard enough. Captain Hiro, we will hire you to guard a private supply unit. Will that satisfy you?”

“I’m not gonna just say yes to that. Can I have some more details?”

“Tch.”

Don’t click your tongue at me, you hag!

“We have two ships with us that belong to the Holz family—ahem, we have two *privately owned* cargo ships. One is the Pelican IV, and the other is the Flying Tortoise. We would hire you to protect them.”

“Hey, hold on. Aren’t Marquess Holz’s supply ships pretty much live bait for pirates?”

“Oh ho ho!” Serena laughed haughtily. “Yes, you silly man. He finds himself attacked frequently for some strange reason, and we just *happen* to save him every time. But it’s coincidentally so helpful for us to expose those who conspire against us.”

Serena seemed to enjoy dishing out as many jabs as she was taking from me. It was an effective method of pirate hunting, and as long as we could withstand an attack for long enough, the Pirate Hunting Unit would save us.

“Sure, let’s just leave it at that. What will our reward be?”

“The standard wage for a gold-rank mercenary is about 80,000 Ener per day.”

“That’s pretty cheap,” I complained.

“Any rewards from destroyed pirate ships will be yours as well,” Serena added.

I looked at Elma, who shrugged.

“Given our situation, I’m glad to take whatever money we can get.”

“True… Okay. Let’s go with that.”

“Very well. I will prepare the proper paperwork and send it through to the guild. Please stand by in your ship.”

“Got it.”

“As for Christina, we would be happy to take care of her here.” Serena looked to Chris.

I followed suit, and the girl shook her head vigorously. It seemed she wanted to be in the Krishna.

“There you have it. We appreciate the thought, though.”

“I see. Yes, well, I suppose a ship full of soldiers wouldn’t be the best environment for a little girl.” Serena nodded in understanding.

Aren’t you a girl too? I stared at her, baffled.

“I am a soldier and a noble with formal training, not a little girl. Note the sword.” Serena smirked fearlessly. Did she think that sword would save her from anything? What, could she use the Force to deflect lasers and do telekinesis? A mystery, indeed.

“Welp. If that’s that, I’m out.”

“Good. I will call soldiers to escort you to your ship. I wouldn’t want you wandering into our secret divisions, after all.” Serena used her handheld terminal to call someone.

I’d been worried, but this seemed less dangerous than being all on our own. *Phew! That’s the power of connections.*

Epilogue

WE RETURNED to the Krishna and decided to take a break while we waited. We had been through a fight with battle robots, had a huge dogfight with space pirates, eaten dinner, left Cierra III, and met with Serena. I was really feeling the exhaustion. I took the first bath, went to my room, and sat in bed in comfy clothes, missing the lazy comfort of the bath.

As I picked up my tablet to look over the list of pirate bounties I'd earned today, there was a buzz at the door. *Who could it be?* I wondered as I remotely opened the door. There, I saw Chris. She seemed to have just gotten out of the bath and was wearing cute pink sleepwear. *What's going on?*

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I wanna talk."

"Go on, then." I was barely dressed. Still, I let Chris come in and offered her a chair to sit in. I sat on my bed so I could face her as we spoke. "You must be tired from today, right?" I said, making small talk. "The g-forces during battles are *rough*." Physically fit as I was, it had still taken a toll on me, so I could only imagine what it had been like for her. *Maybe we should get a check-up tomorrow morning.*

"Yes, a little. But when I'm with you all, all I feel is my heartbeat…"

"Was it fun?"

"Yes." Chris looked up at me with a big smile so infectious that I had to grin back.

"Things aren't always this crazy, though. It's a real shame our vacation got interrupted a week early."

"It is. I'm sad that we didn't get to finish our fishing trip," Chris said, looking disappointed.

I slightly raised the heat on the thermostat next to my bed; I didn't want her getting chilly since her hair was still wet. *Why doesn't she just talk about what she came here for?* "Do you have something on your mind?"

She looked down quietly.

C'mon, girl. I'm not a mind-reader, and my intuition sucks. I'm not sensitive to the subtleties of women either. If you clam up, we won't get anywhere. "Hrm… Do you wanna come over here?" I patted the spot next to me, eliciting a nod from Chris. She sat next to me. *Look, I don't think her innocence is cute just because I'm a pervert, okay? I mean it. I think.* "Is it difficult to talk about?"

"Yes… It is."

Stop getting all blushy and fidgety, I'm begging you. I'm not a pervert, but I might feel a change coming on.

"So…" she began.

"Yeah?"

"You prefer taller, more feminine women, don't you?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah. True."

"I see…" Chris slumped her shoulders sadly. I had a feeling about why she was patting her own chest.

"Chris, I don't hate you. In fact, I'd be more inclined to say I like you. You're cute in a way that makes me want to keep you safe."

"O-okay!"

"But I'm not going to do anything to you. It would hurt my reputation, and it would be disrespectful to you and your grandfather."

"Aw…"

"I have a simpler problem too."

"Hm?"

"Not to be vulgar, but I don't think it, uh…would work. Physically." I used both pointer fingers to show the girth of you-know-what.

"Oh, dear…" It seemed she understood what I was getting at. She turned beet red.

"I'm not about to ruin a poor girl who hasn't even finished puberty."

"But I'm about the same height as Mimi."

“Well, you really got me there, huh? But Mimi’s an adult. You’re not there yet, are you?”

“Mrgh.” Chris banged her head against my chest.

Hah! You little sillyhead.

“You don’t have to be in such a hurry.”

“I do! Once my grandfather picks me up, I won’t get to be with you anymore,” Chris murmured quietly, still leaning against me.

“Yeah, true.” I scratched my cheek and looked up at the ceiling.

Once her uncle, Balthazar, was dealt with, she would be the last remaining descendant of the Dalenwald family. There might be a branch family or retainers to carry on the family name, but they didn’t matter as long as Chris lived. Getting a man to marry her would be the easiest way to retain the bloodline. And if that was what her grandfather wanted, no doubt a good suitor would come her way before long. I didn’t know the details of marriage in the Empire, let alone among the nobility, but I’d picked up enough bits and pieces to guess.

But I would not be her man. Count Dalenwald would pick her husband, probably without any regard to Chris’s feelings. I mean, that was how it worked, right? I doubted he would let some common mercenary sully the bloodline.

“Hey, Chris. I—” She put a soft finger to my lips, cutting me off.

“I know, but please don’t say it. Let’s just stay like this…” Chris said, burying her face into my chest and wrapping her arms around me.

I patted her back. *Hmm… Yeah, I just can’t see myself getting involved with her. A good man would refuse her outright.*

“…”

I looked at the girl’s head and sighed. Even if I was going to do that in the end, it wasn’t going to happen right now.

“Wanna sleep like this?” I asked.

“Ulp?!”

“If it is your wish, my lady, I will be your sword and your pillow… Haaah.” I let out a big yawn and lay down while Chris sat frozen.

She hesitated, but she eventually lay down next to me.

“I’m turning out the lights.”

“Okay.”

In the darkness, Chris fidgeted for a while before going still.

She can’t stay here for long, and not everything can go her way, but I’d like to do whatever I can to make this little girl’s dreams come true. I vowed to myself that I would as I let go of consciousness and drifted off to the dream world.

Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing Volume 3 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! I don't have to tell you the whole title at this point, right?

Hi there; I'm Ryuto. I'm relieved that Volume 3 has made it on sale without issue. Also, Volume 1 of the manga version is out now! I can't get enough of Shunichi Matsui's Elma and Mimi; they're too cute!

I know you don't care about how I'm doing, so let's make it quick: yep, life is still pretty much the same. I'm a shut-in, anyway! Ha ha ha ha! And my doggy is as energetic as ever.

Now, back to the novel. Woo, swimsuit episode! We got both the noble girl Chris and the Maidroid Mei this time! Blonde hair and blue eyes are great, but c'mon, black hair is just as good! All of the girls are so pretty when Tetsuhiro Nabeshima draws them… God, I wish Hiro would just explode.

Anyway, let's do it! It's time for round three of "things I didn't get to explain in the story itself"! This time, let's talk about the resort planets.

They all fall under the same umbrella, but there are multiple kinds. The Cierra System is a resort galaxy focused on leisure in nature, with three planets: one oceanic, one continental, and one cold planet. Each is optimized for humanity and provides unique services.

Cierra II, the continental planet, is sold as a spa resort with its many onsen baths. Cierra III, the planet from this volume, is a marine resort. Meanwhile, Cierra IV is an exciting ski resort.

There are other resort star systems as well. For example, there are some resort systems that focus on casino and coliseum colonies, while other medical resorts use cutting-edge anti-aging technology to draw in customers.

Hm? What about sexy ones? Let's just say there are plenty of *entertainment* resorts out there! There's demand for that all over the place, so regardless of entire resort systems, such services are probably common

enough. Cierra III has Maidroids, after all. What else could there be? Plenty, I'd bet.

Well, that should do it for today.

Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Let's meet again in Volume 4! Gee, I sure hope it comes out!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

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